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BY

JOHN STRANGE WINTER

AUTHOR OF "BOOTLES' BABY," "BEAUTIFUL JIM," ETC., ETC.

NEW YORK

FRANK F. LOVELL & COMPANY

142 & 144 WORTH STREET

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By JOHN W. LOVELL.

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MRS. BOB.

CHAPTER I.

A SERIOUS QUESTION.

"Measure not despatch by the time of sitting, but by the advancement of business."—BACON.

AFTER Mrs. Trafford's niece was married to the Honourable Marcus Orford of the Black Horse and her daughter to Sir Anthony Staunton of the same regiment, she declared to everybody that she no longer intended to live in Blankhampton.

There were ill-natured and envious people in the Town who remarked that Blankhampton had done uncommonly well by Mrs. Trafford, and that for her to betake herself out of it as soon as she had secured the two best matches of that year was a regular case of burning her boats behind her and kicking down the ladder by which she had climbed to fame and fortune.

Mrs. Trafford was resolute however and actually before the Stauntons had returned from their honeymoon she, with her eldest and only unmarried flower, Julia, packed up their boxes and went off to

London town for the ostensible purpose of finding what Mrs. Trafford, like a good many other people who do not wish to set up a large establishment called a *pied-à-terre.*

It was an innocent pilgrimage. They put up at the Grand and worked from thence West by South-West. They wanted to be nearer the Park than Charing Cross and in fact to be in the best part of Mayfair, a part of London in which it is not easy to establish a *pied-à-terre* on reasonable terms. They were really very unlucky—they just missed a charming little bijou residence over a saddler's shop in South Audley Street, what in prosaic language is called an "upper part," but, considering the tiny rooms, the bad look-out, the narrow passages and stupid twisted stairs, it is not very likely that Mrs. Trafford would have consented to change her smart commodious house in the best part of Blankhampton, for which she paid a modest fifty pounds a year, for the bijou residence in South Audley Street at a yearly rental of two hundred pounds.

At all events she did nothing of the kind; after thoroughly searching over all the best districts in Town, after interviewing innumerable house-agents, worrying a greater number of caretakers, visiting quite a quantity of flats large and small, and generally having an uncommonly good time, Mrs. Trafford and Julia went back to Blankhampton and took up their quarters again at No. 7 St. Eve's. "Well, I had not quite decided to leave," Mrs. Trafford explained elaborately during the next week

or two, "though I had more than half a mind to live in London in future as being nearer my young people, or at least as being always a likely and convenient centre for all of us. But we did not see anything that we liked, and dear Laura and Madge begged us so not to leave St. Eve's till the regiment goes, that Julia and I thought we would let the question rest for the present. Besides that," Mrs. Trafford added, with the little candid laugh that hitherto had stood her in such good stead, "I am not a millionaire, but a poor little widow who has just had two smart weddings to drain her purse, and really house rent in London means quite an income —two hundred a year for a little hole I could not get my piano into."

So the question remained in abeyance, and Mrs. Trafford and her eldest flower took up the thread of their old life once more, and the people who had said disagreeable things about burning boats had, of course, nothing further to say.

But although life in Blankhampton is of the dullest, and you may go dreaming on from day to day until you begin to wonder for what reason you were born and why you go on living, to a woman of Mrs. Trafford's temperament there is always more than enough to fill up the day. She had her house, as heretofore, all her old society (excepting such as she had judiciously weeded out), and a great many new friends whose acquaintance she had made after or about the time of the two smart marriages which had so drained her purse. And in Blank-

hampton, like a great many other provincial towns, the keeping up of society is a very serious matter. Almost any afternoon between the hours of three and five you may see a dozen old ladies sallying forth in all the glory of their best bonnets, holding in their pale kid-covered fingers a resplendent card-case. If it is a silver one, so much the better, or it may be of carved ivory hailing from China or of ivory and silver from the far off Indian strand. Failing these comes in the useful and highly ornamental mother-o'-pearl which is sometimes made up with little squares of shining green substance, some kind of shell, I fancy. Ah! dear, dear, it is all very funny!

Mrs. Trafford was great on calling, and she was also one of those little friendly women who make a virtue of calling outside the regulation hours—at *some* houses, that is to say. And also she had, besides her house and her acquaintance to keep up, a great and serious object in life, an object which was she very well knew not to be entered on lightly or with frivolity, an object which in plain language was to get her remaining flower, Julia, suitably settled in life.

In the case of Mrs. Marcus Orford matters had arranged themselves—and Lady Staunton's marriage had undoubtedly come about by reason of the other; but with Julia it was rather different. Julia was no longer in her first youth, and she was not pretty, neither was she an interesting or particularly accomplished young lady. She sang a little, it is true,

but, somehow, her singing did not seem to "catch on" with the Blankhampton people, who rather pride themselves on their taste for music. Nor was Julia Trafford popular in the town; she had a high-pitched somewhat cracked voice and a laugh that did not ring true.

Still Mrs. Trafford did not despair. Julia had inherited all these characteristics from her and they had not in her case prevented her from making a match which was a really brilliant one, and, moreover, she had since the two smart marriages, come to feel herself quite like a general to whom defeat is an unknown quantity.

In due time the Black Horse left Blankhampton, taking Mrs. Trafford's youngest daughter and her niece in its train, but still her object was not yet accomplished and the little woman began to feel that she was losing time and that her eldest flower was losing ground. She began to feel, in short, that something must be done, that she must bring all her energies to bear upon the question and, to use a sporting term, the event must be pulled off.

"Now the thing is," said the little woman to herself, "how shall I do it and what shall I do?" and then she cast about in her mind and went over all the likely young men that the town contained.

They were not many, for, somehow, in those sleepy old cathedral towns the young men seem to drift away into the outer world and very few stay behind to carry on the traditions of their forefathers, generally those who do stay are the steady-going un-

ambitious ones of the flock to which they belong, who stay in the sphere in which they are born because it is easier to do so than to make an effort and break the bonds of tradition by which they are bound.

To go into detail, there was first of all the Adonis of the town, one Gerard De Lisle—would he do? Mrs. Trafford looked doubtful but finally decided that he would do on a pinch. A couple of years before I am bound to admit, Mrs. Trafford would, vulgarly speaking, have jumped at Mr. Gerard De Lisle as a husband for any of her young ladies, and I am quite sure that either Julia or Laura would with equal alacrity have jumped at him also. But during two years a great many changes may come to pass, and in Mrs. Trafford's case they had done so. Her beautiful niece Madge and her pretty daughter Laura had married as, in Mrs. Trafford's wildest and most ambitious dreams, she had never dared to imagine probable or even possible.

So with regard to Mr. Gerard De Lisle Mrs. Trafford had come to consider him from a different standpoint, even remembering that he was the Adonis of Blankhampton, that his family were one and all persons of the most absolutely unblemished character, that his father was a tower of strength among the unco' guid, of the kind who invariably make a special point of calling themselves "*good* church-people," of whom there was a large faction in Blankhampton, that his mother was a woman of good family—I mean of very superior birth to the original

De Lisles, who could only boast of a two generations' remove from the trading class—that his sisters were a judicious combination of unco' guidism and tempered worldliness and contrived to have an uncommonly good time between their adherence to both parties, that he had one or two brothers each remarkable in some special line, one for cricket, one for music, one for following his religion with the help of the highest and most complicated forms of Ritualism. Added to all this, Gerard De Lisle was undeniably the handsomest man in Blankhampton.

I do not think, seeing him in London, in the Park or a theatre, that you would have picked him out as being a man of out of the common looks. He was tall, he was fairly broad, but like his father he had a certain air of carrying a very short tubbish kind of body on particularly long and loose-jointed spindle-like legs, which somehow always made me wonder that the pretty Blankhampton girls were so utterly "gone" upon him, as they one and all undoubtedly were. For the rest he was rather light in colouring without being what you would describe as a fair man, had a straight nose, a pair of blueish bad-tempered eyes and a tightly compressed mouth which precluded the idea of his disposition being a genial one.

Add to all this an extra-superfine manner, a manner which took the middle of the pavement and paused for an instant at the street corners while the quick hard eyes glanced around as if to see what new worlds there were for Adonis to conquer, a manner

which was always squaring its shoulders and flourishing its walking-stick and made a little more display of its very white and shining linen than was exactly pretty, and there you have Mr. Gerard De Lisle, whom everybody in Blankhampton called "Adonis," except the pretty girls, who had such a variety of gushing names for him that I will spare their feelings by not repeating them.

I am afraid that this description gives you but a poor idea of my "Adonis." Well, I will be a little more explicit. It is true that he was handsome and as vain as a peacock, yes, I admit it; but he was not a bad sort of fellow by any means. On the contrary, he was scrupulously honourable and I know that he could be kind—and if I have seen him pay up his shilling for a raffle he did not wish to go in for, and say with an air of unutterable surprise when his tormentor asked for his name, "Mr. De Lisle," in an accent which conveyed clearly that she must either be a knave or a fool, I have also seen him speak very kindly and without any "manner" at all to a little woman whom I knew to be in dire trouble, have seen him take hold of her arm for a moment in a man's protecting way, and then pat her shoulder with a kindly, "There, there—yes, I understand, I'll let you know directly I find out about it." Oh yes, with all his little vanities Adonis was a good fellow down at the bottom, and in spite of their sanctimoniousness, most people in Blankhampton would take the word of a De Lisle sooner than of most of the townsfolk.

Besides Adonis there was—well, really, it was wonderful how very few young men there were! There was the Reverend Evelyn Gabrielli, the youngest of the minor-canons at the Parish. He was rich (or at least certainly well off), he was young, he was a good size and fairly good-looking, and for little vanities Adonis was not in it with him. He had three valuable rings for every finger and thumb of his two hands, and with regard to his rings he did not hide his light under a bushel.

But Evelyn Gabrielli was, as Mrs. Trafford knew from past experience, no good in a matrimonial sense. Indeed he entirely believed in the celibacy of the clergy—the Priesthood I believe he called it—and was particularly careful to keep at a safe distance from the meshes of the matrimonial net. Perhaps it was for this reason that he especially attached himself to Mrs. (Colonel) Browne and, as a set-off against his vow of celibacy, very soon became the scandal of the town.

Then there was Mr. Hooper, another minor-canon, also in comfortable circumstances and one of those intensely aggravating men who always are wanting to get married and never do. He was no good either.

Then—well, really, there were the officers quartered in the garrison and that was all. Somehow, although Mrs. Trafford did not mean to neglect the red-coats, she had not much faith in any of them being attracted by Julia; so by the time she had thoroughly thought out the situation, she

had come to the conclusion that if she ever saw Julia settled in a home of her own at Blankhampton it would most likely be in the large and commodious old house so difficult for a stranger to find, because it was tucked away down a narrow archway just wide enough to allow a carriage to pass under it into the wider space of the court within.

Of course it would not be a brilliant marriage, the little widow told herself, but it would be a nice comfortable position for Julia, who would naturally be made very much of by the De Lisle family, who in spite of their undeniable weight in the town, were, of course, at best but professional people and as such not by any means the equal of the Traffords, more especially since they had become allied to the houses of Ceespring and Staunton.

But not one word did Mrs. Trafford say on the subject to her Julia, she was, in fact, far too skilful a tactician to do that. However, one morning at breakfast she suggested in a casual sort of way to her daughter that Blankhampton seemed very dull since Laurie and Madge had gone.

"Oh! awfully dull," answered Julia, who had as I think I have already said, a very high-pitched voice.

"Really, I think we had better give a little dinner-party," suggested Mrs. Trafford, as if the idea had but that instant occurred to her—"What do you say?"

"Yes—or a dance," said Julia, who liked having dances in her own house because she was sure of having a good number of partners.

"Oh! I think not a dance, dear," objected the little widow, who did not see spending a lot of money just to entertain a crowd of people to whom she was entirely indifferent and who would probably rather retard than in any way further her schemes.

"Why not?" exclaimed Julia.

"Well because Laurie and Madge would both think it most unkind to have a dance immediately after they have left Blankhampton, and when they could none of them possibly come back for it. But to have a little dinner-party is quite another thing, don't you see?"

"Yes, I think you are right, Mother," Julia replied—she was really a very sensible person. "Then what people are you thinking of asking?"

"Why, my dear, I haven't thought about it at all," Mrs. Trafford said—which, by-the-by, was neither more nor less than a story—"but I think we ought to ask the Canon and Mrs. Berkeley—we have not asked them since they have been in residence. And there are the Lovelaces. I don't care much about her—she is so friendly with those very unpleasant Mauleverers, but at the same time I think we ought to ask them occasionally, it is so much more agreeable to be friendly with *all* one's neighbours, and she is pretty (of a bold kind), and wears charming dresses and diamonds."

"Yes, she does. And be sure you ask Captain Legard or she will be as glum as an owl all the evening," put in Julia with her little cracked laugh.

"Then we will ask Captain Legard," said Mrs. Trafford indulgently. "Then there are the Prescotts. I think we ought to ask them soon —we have been there several times since they were here."

"They make six and ourselves eight," remarked Julia—"and Captain Legard nine. You will want another man."

"Well—there is Mr. Gerard De Lisle. We might ask him."

"Yes—" Julia was a little doubtful. "But if you do you will have to ask Mina."

"I thought they were all away."

"Mina came back yesterday, so you can't ask Gerard without asking her."

"No—Well, I don't know that that would make any difference; we will ask Mr. O'Hagan."

"Yes, he would do. That makes ten, and he will take Mina in. I shouldn't ask any more if I were you."

"I don't think we will. Then Julia, dear, will you send out the invitations this morning?"

"Yes—but when will you have it?"

"When—Oh! let me see. Let us say Thursday week, dear—This is Saturday, so it is quite enough notice to give."

"Oh! yes—Eight o'clock, I suppose?"

"Yes, dear — Eight o'clock," returned Mrs. Trafford blithely.

CHAPTER II.

A PIECE OF NEWS.

"The test of profitable hearing is not the pleasure of the moment, but the subsequent result."—PLUTARCH.

IN due time Mrs. Trafford's little dinner—she was quite famous in Blankhampton for her little dinners—came off. On the appointed evening the house in St. Eve's had put on a gala like aspect—and when Mrs. Trafford's house was wearing its gala-dress, it was a circumstance to which you could not shut your eyes. There was a charming arrangement in lieu of the cosy fire of winter time, which made the fire-place and hearth look like a small fernery—an arrangement of looking-glass and growing plants, trailing Ivy and soft delicate moss, to which Mrs. Trafford gave a good deal of personal attention and was in consequence greatly envied by her friends, even those who were the fortunate possessors of large conservatories.

A few minutes before eight Julia made her appearance in the drawing-room, where her Mother had been all in readiness for her visitors for some little time.

"Do I look all right, Mother?" Julia asked in

her loudest company voice, for publicity always had that effect upon Miss Trafford, and the larger the company the louder became her tones. "Shall I do?"

"You look delightful, dear," returned Mrs. Trafford in all sincerity.

Julia undoubtedly did look nice. Her gown was one she had worn during her visit to Town and still looked very fresh and pretty. It was rose-pink, was of a soft and gauzy material and was of that fashion which is highly becoming to little women of spare proportions. It was cut sufficiently low in the neck to show that her throat was white, and the sleeves were puffed and gathered and then were tied or seemed to be tied with a profusion of smart ribbons; she wore a great cluster of blush roses on one side of her bodice and carried a pink fan of fluffy feathers.

"Oh! that is all right," she said with a gratified simper. There was a long strip of looking-glass placed between two of the windows and Julia was still craning her neck so as to get a side view of herself when the door opened and Cox, the neat parlour-maid, announced—"Captain Legard."

Now Captain Legard was a young man in whom Julia did not take a great amount of interest; he had not been very long in Blankhampton, and ever since the first day that he had come into it he had persistently and abjectly worshipped at the shrine of Mrs. Lovelace. Therefore Julia, after giving him her hand, found she had nothing

further to say to him and went to the little bow window over the entrance, which was the favourite outlook of everybody in the house because from it you could see from one end to the other of St. Eve's, which was far and away the most interesting street in Blankhampton.

In two minutes a cab stopped at the door below and a vision of radiant beauty stepped out and disappeared into the house—the Lovelaces. Julia sat down on the velvet cushioned window-seat and breathed a sigh of relief that Mrs. Lovelace would be able to enter the room without finding her talking to or even sitting near her especial adorer. She had seen Mrs. Lovelace more than once enter a room, just flash her great black eyes round and by a mere glance take Captain Legard away from anybody to whom he might be talking at the time, and Julia had no mind, if she wasn't as fair to see as Mrs. Lovelace, to let her have that kind of triumph at her expense.

The next moment Mrs. Lovelace came in followed by her husband—and oh! what a vision of loveliness she was. I do not know that Mrs. Lovelace without the beautiful gown of white and gold brocade which she wore, would have been such a vision of loveliness as undoubtedly the gown would have been without Mrs. Lovelace. There was very little body to it and so much train that Julia caught herself wondering whether the skirt had not been made before the bodice and the dressmaker had fallen short of stuff. She wore some beautiful diamonds and a great ruby snake upon one arm and without doubt pretty

woman and gown together made a beautiful picture.

She was rather a slender figure, and fairly graceful, but it was her face that attracted you most, it was such a bold little wilful face, with a pert upturned nose and a warm, dark, almost swarthy complexion out of which her black eyes blazed like a pair of live coals. Yes, undoubtedly Mrs. Lovelace was a pretty woman.

And her husband? Well, he was a somewhat colourless person, good-looking and particularly patient in disposition, else he would never have put up with so strong a flavouring of Legard in his daily dish.

Then the door opened again and Cox announced, "Mr. O'Hagan!" and then walked into the room, or I should say *shot* into it a tall and handsome man, all blushes and confusion, although judging from his appearance he had need for neither.

"How do you do Mrs. Trafford—I hope I'm not very late?" he asked breathlessly.

"Oh! no, you are not nearly the last, Mr. O'Hagan," she answered kindly, and then Mr. O'Hagan feverishly got through his greetings to the rest of the company.

It seemed such an ordeal to the poor fellow, who had literally an impediment in his speech, not a stammer or a stutter or a splutter but an actual catch in his jaw as if the muscles wanted oiling, and this combined with extreme sensitiveness and nervousness made on-lookers wonder why he ever

distressed himself by going to dinners or any other kind of parties at all.

Next to come were Canon and Mrs. Berkeley. Now Canon Berkeley was just then first favourite with the great spiritual lord of the diocese, John, by Divine right, Lord Bishop of Blankhampton. To anyone who knows Blankhampton this is almost a sufficient description, but I suppose I must add a little more for the benefit of those of my readers whose acquaintance with the ancient city is, as yet, a slight one.

He was, besides being a Canon Residentiary of the Cathedral, the Rector of one of the best livings in the diocese, and besides these two substantial charges he held various other offices, those of rural dean, of examining-chaplain to his lordship and so on, and from one end to the other of the diocese he was looked upon as the next man upon whom the archidiaconal mantle would fall, unless indeed anything should happen to the gerat John, for whom there were possibilities of translation in several directions, or to be accurate in two—one in this world and one in the next.

Every one wondered why honours should thus have fallen thick and fast upon Canon Berkeley. He was a particularly poor stick as a preacher, being neither learned nor eloquent, and I must say at this point, that although I have never liked the great John of Blankhampton, he certainly ought to have known a good preacher when he heard one, for there was no fault to be found with his own discourses,

which were both powerful and well-delivered, always taking exception to his addresses to children, which invariably gave one the idea of an elephant trying to play spillikins.

Canon Berkeley was not a popular man in Blankshire, more I fancy because he had an unpopular manner than from any other cause! I may be wrong but it seems to me that a parson and a doctor, more than any other class of men that you can name, ought first and foremost of their qualifications to possess a certain charm of manner. I believe if a scheme could be organised by which relays of the Clergy could be sent to a sort of Staff-College in London (or would not the grand new Clergy House that we have heard so much about lately answer the purpose?) and take lessons in manner from say a score of the greatest medical specialists of the day, that on the whole the influence of the Church would be about a million times as great as it is.

For the sake of example and for their own inestimable benefit, we would begin with the entire bench of bishops—stay though, I am getting along too fast for there is one spiritual lord among them now who has delightful manners. I do not care to name him because I might thus offend all the rest, but I may most emphatically say that he is not that bishop of whom they say he looks like the devil and has the voice of an angel; that gentleman is a sort of Jekyll and Hyde, all urbanity and the most courtly suavity one day, the next a lump of sullenness, who will go to a country confirmation, and at the house where he

is entertained, sit speechless and mannerless at the feast given in his honour and glumly put out of sight the whole of a rich and extravagant dish of stewed sweetbreads or cream, and then go off to bed with a curt "good-night" and be taken very ill before morning and throw the entire household into an uproar. No, I do not mean that gentleman, nor do I think he could be let off a severe course at the new "Clerical Staff-College."

After the bishops we might give special attention to the clergy of the Metropolis and particularly to those in the suburbs, whose manners are atrocious. Then we would gradually work downwards through the different ranks until we had put the requisite polish upon the very last ordained deacons.

Without joking, I really think I have hit upon the grandest scheme that has been mooted for at least fifty years!

In person Canon Berkeley was exactly like a hired coachman, I mean the sort of coachman that you get in London with a turn-out from the job-master's; he was tall and ill-proportioned, and his gaitered legs showed off his flat splayed feet to their worst advantage—not that he wore gaiters that evening for his substantial legs were clad in silken hose! He was sloping in the shoulder and narrow in the chest and wore the badly-grown beard, scanty and patchy, which is so much affected by a certain class of successful clergymen! With all this he had a somewhat oily and sycophantish manner, intended to be a very courtly one!

His wife was a dowdy and had little or nothing to say for herself, the sort of woman who, taken on her own merits, would inevitably have slipped into complete obscurity, and on whom the little air of dignity which most clergymen's wives assume, sooner or later, sat very oddly, like a diamond necklace on a cotton frock. She wore a brown brocaded gown, of very modest cut, only a small V indicating that it was not her Sunday church-going frock. The only marks of worldliness about it were arrangements (now obsolete) of white lace about the wrists and along the V of the neck, and seriously if Mrs. Berkeley looked somewhat old-fashioned, her gown was in itself a sermon against such apparel—or want of it—as served to display Mrs. Lovelace's arms and shoulders.

There were now only two more guests to come—Mr. Gerard De Lisle and his sister Mina—and during the interval of waiting, Mrs. Trafford worked her way round to Major Lovelace and whispered to him that he would kindly sit at the end of the table and take Mrs. Berkeley in to dinner. Then she passed on to Captain Legard and intimated to him that Mrs. Lovelace was his portion, and to Mr. O'Hagan that his lady had not yet come.

Then Cox appeared again and the De Lisles came in.

It was odd to see with what a different air the brother and sister entered the room! Mina was fair and very tall, with shapeless features and a dimple

that gave her an infinite amount of trouble. She had a pale complexion and nice gray eyes, with thick black brows which met in the middle and gave her the appearance of having but one. She was rather slight as well as tall and had a waist just eighteen inches in circumference. Her waist was so short and her legs so long that in order to avoid gawkiness she had been trained to take very short steps, so she minced into the room looking up from under her black eye-brow in a juvenile girlish sort of way (Mina was thirty, all the same) and with her mouth set in the sort of fixed smile best calculated to show off that dimple.

Then came Gerard, with such a marvellous expanse of shirt-front that his legs almost tottered under it and seemed to sprawl about in all directions in the effort to keep their footing. He had a nice white collar and a little black tie, and shiny little sharp-pointed shoes tied with bows of black ribbon. And likewise he had a liberal amount of manner on, the manner which had made him neither more nor less than the darling of half the women's hearts in the town.

Two minutes after the last arrivals, Cox announced that dinner was served, and Major Lovelace gave his arm to Mrs. Berkeley and led the way to the dining-room. And when in their turn Julia and Mr. De Lisle found their places, Gerard discovered that he was placed between Julia and his own sister. So also did Mrs. Trafford (who, by-the-

bye, had carefully arranged the table herself that afternoon).

"Oh, my dear Mr. De Lisle," she said, "this is dreadful—you cannot sit next to your own sister—it is worse than a husband and wife finding themselves together."

"Pray don't trouble to make any change, Mrs. Trafford," said he promptly. "I can keep my sister in order and see that she behaves properly," at which everybody laughed and the table remained as it was.

Clever little Mrs. Trafford! For the natural consequence of her "mistake" was that Mr. De Lisle confined all his attentions to Miss Julia and left his sister to be kind and encouraging to Mr. O'Hagan. Consequently Julia had a very good time and showed to her best advantage, and before the ladies left the table she had heard a great piece of news from Gerard.

"You know the Manor Lodge, don't you, Miss Trafford," he said.

"The Manor Lodge," she repeated. "No, I don't think I do. Who lives there?"

"Well, nobody has lived there for a long time, never since I can remember," he answered.

"Oh, the old house on the Appleton-road—yes, I know. What of it?"

"It is let—or rather sold."

"You don't say so. And who has bought it?"

A Mr. Markham, an Australian. He is going to spend a lot of money over it and means to live

there as soon as it can be got ready. Meantime, he has taken Brentwood Hall for six months."

"Really, you don't say so. Are they nice people, do you think?"

"Yes, I think so. His wife is a very pretty gentle lady-like kind of woman and they both seem uncommonly keen on hunting. They are going to fit the stables up in superb style."

"And have they already come to Brentwood?"

"I think not. They come next week, I believe."

"I wonder what made them think of coming to Blankhampton," said Julia wonderingly. "They must have been very much charmed with the Manor Lodge to take so much trouble over it. There must be plenty of houses to be had in good hunting centres which would be ready for them to walk right into."

"Yes, but Mrs. Markham took a fancy to this place, the moment she saw it she turned round to him and said 'Bob! I must have this place at any price.'"

"And were you there?" asked Julia, who was astounded to hear of the great Adonis having personally to do with so common a matter as house-showing."

"I? Oh, no. But we have all Mr. Bellairs' affairs in our hands and one of our young clerks went over the place with them. I—oh, no! Well—I saw them when they came to talk over terms and that sort of thing."

"I see. Well, I suppose," said Julia, "that every-

body will be very glad to have the Manor Lodge occupied again. I don't know that it will make much difference to us, for my mother is always talking about leaving Blankhampton and settling in Town. So one of these days, I daresay we shall take flight and her threatenings will become reality."

"In that case Blankhampton will miss you dreadfully," said Mr. De Lisle gallantly.

"Really! Ah, I don't know. We are but outcasts here, Mr. De Lisle, strangers and pilgrims, you know. Now if the De Lisles were to betake themselves away it would be looked upon in the light of a public calamity, for you have been here for hundreds and hundreds of years, haven't you?"

"We have been a long time in the place, it is true," answered he, who did not feel inclined to tell her that his great grandfather was the first of his name who had part or lot in the old city and that he, as a matter of fact, had come straight from his native farm to be apprenticed to a Blankhampton tradesman!

Ah! dear, dear, it is at times very convenient to be what Julia described as "outcasts," "strangers, and pilgrims" and so on—it enables you to talk about "my people" in a way that does not sound pretty when you have been mixed up with a place for three or four generations and everybody knows exactly who and what "my people" are.

"You seemed," said Mrs. Trafford to Julia, when

the company had gone, "to get on very well to-night with Mr. De Lisle."

"Oh, yes, pretty well," answered Julia. "But all the same I don't care much about him, he does fancy himself so enormously. By-the-by, did anybody tell you about the Manor Lodge?"

"No, not a word; what about it?" Mrs. Trafford answered.

And then Julia repeated all the information that Gerard De Lisle had given her about Mr. and Mrs. "Bob" Markham and what they meant to do with the long uninhabited Manor Lodge.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. BOB MARKHAM'S BROTHER.

Love he comes and love he tarries
Just as fate or fancy carries,
Longest stays when sorest chidden,
Laughs and flies when pressed and bidden.
—CAMPBELL.

BEFORE long the news that the Manor Lodge had been bought by a rich Australian and was already in the hands of workmen who would put it into thorough repair, spread over Blankhampton and everybody was agog with curiosity and excitement.

I don't think that so much interest would have been taken in Mr. and Mrs. Markham if they had taken any other house than the Manor Lodge. But

the Manor Lodge was interesting enough in itself to shed a halo of romance over anyone connected with it, and the fact that these Australians had bought it and were actually going to live in it, was enough to make all the neighbourhood eager to make their acquaintance.

The Manor Lodge stood about a mile from the city on the left bank of the river which runs through its midst. It was a large house standing two storeys high, built of white brick and having very wide eaves. The lower windows were all French casements and were shaded by wide verandas, over which there climbed in wild and untended profusion roses and honey-suckle, ivy and wisteria.

The gardens had once been beautiful, with wide pathways, a terrace overlooking the small park, a fountain and several marble statues standing here and there. There were two conservatories built against the house and two large vineries, which had been kept in fair order by an old gardener who had been put into the place as a caretaker by way of giving him an easy berth. This old man had after his first week or so given up trying to do the work of three active men and so keep the garden in order, and had quietly slipped into troubling himself about nothing but the grapes and peaches of which Mr Bellairs expected an occasional basket to be sent for his table.

But very soon under the Markham rule, the whole place began to assume a different appearance —the roofs and chimneys were thoroughly over-

hauled, the old windows were mended with new ones, the white walls were cleaned down, the verandas repaired, and the various creepers were in the hands of a skilled gardener soon reduced to order and neatness. The fountain was cleaned out and set playing again and one morning Mrs. Markham brought a big bowl in which were eight or ten gold fish which she turned into the fountain in the large conservatory, watching their movements with the curiosity of a child.

The very statues were cleaned of the green moss and growth which is the outcome of ages of neglect and now they shone forth once more in all their beauty, once more Venus and Apollo enjoyed the beauty of comparatively smooth lawns and well-clipped hedges and quaintly shaped yew-trees, though not so smooth or trim as they would be after a year or two of the new order.

More than once Mrs. Trafford and Julia happened to pass by the Manor Lodge and saw all the signs of life and wealth about the place. "I think we will go and call on Mrs. Markham next week, Julia," Mrs. Trafford remarked.

They could not from the road see a sign of the house for the avenue made a wide curve from the gate and was lined on either side by a dense hedge of Portuguese laurel; but they had good and substantial evidence of the way in which the place was being fitted up for a large covered cart with open ends passed through the gates just as they reached them and this cart was filled to overflowing with a

variety of tall palms, aloes, cacti and tree-ferns. "I think we will call next week, Julia," said Mrs. Trafford as they walked on towards the town.

So the following week Mrs. Trafford and Julia took an open fly and went to Brentwood, the pretty house, half villa, half mansion, which the Markham's had taken until the Manor Lodge should be ready for them. Yes, Mrs. Markham was at home and they were shown in to the pretty drawing-room where, in spite of its being as yet but early autumn, a bright fire was burning in the polished grate.

As the door closed behind the powdered footman, Mrs. Trafford looked at her daughter and raised her eye-brows; they both knew Brentwood for the Marcus Orfords had lived there from the time they were married until the Black Horse had left Blankhampton, and they therefore knew to a nicety what the natural condition of the house was. Between ourselves it was very different to that in which they now found it.

In two minutes Mrs. Markham came in, a pretty elegant woman wearing a simple tea-gown of dark blue silk, a thing that had cost a deal of money and yet was not too fine for ordinary use. "I am so glad to see you," she cried, holding out both her hands to Mrs. Trafford, "the more so because we brought a letter of introduction to you and were waiting till we got a little more settled to send it to you. It is so kind of you to have come so soon."

Mrs. Trafford was enchanted with her new friend

—"That is very nice to have mutual friends—may I ask who?"

"Oh, yes—it was Colonel Clarke—you know Colonel Clarke, at least he knows you. He said he was an old friend of yours."

"Yes," said Mrs. Trafford doubtfully. She did not happen to remember a Colonel Clarke and she did not like to say so.

"Stay though," Mrs. Markham went on in her soft sweet voice, "I believe I am wrong, it was Coles—Colonel Coles. How stupid of me to mistake. I get so mixed among names. I don't often forget a voice or a face, but the names do bother me terribly sometimes."

"Oh, Colonel Coles. Yes, he was a great friend of ours. So you know him. Is he not a charming old man?"

"Yes, very charming. Bob and I are equally fond of him," Mrs. Markham replied. "Of course, we really don't know many people in England, for I was born in Australia and never left it until less than a year ago. It seems such a big world when you leave your own corner and travel over the parts of it that you don't know, but really it is only a little world after all, for when we left Australia, my husband insisted on stopping at Calcutta and going overland to Bombay, because he wanted to see something of India. Whilst we were up-country, and you may believe we were not long there, we met Colonel Coles. He was dining with us one evening and we were talking of our plans and he

said that he would give us a letter to a Mrs. Trafford whom we ought to know if there was the remotest chance of our pitching our tent anywhere near Blankhampton. Of course, we accepted it gladly although we had then no more intention of settling at Blankhampton than at any other place, and then after all oddly enough here we are."

"And here we are, more oddly still," cried Mrs. Trafford gaily.

In half an hour they were quite in the position of old friends, and at last Mrs. Trafford and Julia looked at one another as a sort of signal that it was time for them to go.

"No, don't look at your daughter in that way," said Mrs. Markham smiling, "because I hear the tea coming and also I saw Bob and my brother pass the window a moment ago. You really must not go till you have seen them."

Nothing loth Mrs. Trafford let herself slip back on to her settee again and Julia put her pretty skirts into the prettiest folds possible. Then the door was opened and the powdered footman entered carrying a nice little bamboo table, followed by a counterpart of himself carrying a large brass tea-tray.

It was an exquisite tea-tray, no, I mean that it was an exquisitely served tea. There was a little brass kettle and lamp matching the tray exactly—a neat little Queen Anne tea-pot, sugar-basin and cream-jug and pretty modern Derby cups and saucers. Everything was neat and bright and without the smallest attempt at show or ostentation.

"Tell your master," said Mrs. Markham in a low voice to the first powdered person.

Really Mrs. Trafford quite enjoyed that footman, for he was a person of delightful manners, just murmuring a reply and bending his head a little, then getting gently out of the room with a sort of glide —oh! without doubt, admirable as the good Cox was, Mrs. Trafford would have thoroughly enjoyed the luxury of a really well-trained footman.

"In two minutes Mr. Markham came in. "Bob," said his wife, "this is Mrs. Trafford to whom Colonel Coles gave us a letter of introduction, and Miss Trafford."

Mr. Markham went across the room to Mrs. Trafford and held out his hand. "I'm a plain Colonial, Mrs. Trafford," he said, "but if I am anything I am hearty. And I am glad to see you, real glad. It is exceedingly kind of you to come and see us before we had time to present our letter of introduction. But perhaps the Colonel wrote to you?"

"No," said Mrs. Trafford, with quite her own little airy laugh, "we came because we heard that you were charming people, and because we always like to be on good terms with our neighbours."

"I am very proud to bid you welcome here," said Mr. Markham, "although it is not my own house. I shall be more happy when I can welcome you there."

He had quite a delightfully old-fashioned air of chivalrous courtesy, and Mrs. Trafford was greatly pleased with him. He waited on her most atten-

tively and put the sugar in her tea with as much care as he might have done if she had been a queen, talking hard all the time.

"Yes. I am a Colonist," he remarked, "that is not an Australian, you know. No, my wife is an Australian and my brother-in-law. Australians think themselves much greater swells than mere Colonists—at least my wife does, I know."

Mrs. Markham laughed. "How silly you are, Bob," she said good-naturedly. "Where is Stephen? I thought I saw him with you just now."

"So you did, my dear. He is coming in a minute. Yes, here he is."

In another moment Mrs. Markham's brother, the "Stephen" of whom she had spoken, came in.

"Let me introduce my brother, Mr. Howard," said Mrs. Markham.

Mr. Howard went and shook hands with Mrs Trafford and then with her daughter. "Stevie," said Mrs. Markham, "Miss Trafford has no tea."

"Oh! I'm so awfully sorry not to have noticed it before," he said in the real Australian voice, slow and pleasant. "Is that for Miss Trafford, Maimie?" as his sister poured out another cup of tea.

"Yes," said the lady, and then Stephen Howard carried it carefully across to Julia, and then went back for the cream and the sugar and the cake-dish, a pretty affair with three compartments in which were respectively bread and butter, cake and fine purple grapes.

"My sister always has fruit with every meal," he said. "I believe it isn't the right thing in England—but we, you know, are savages and may indulge our whims."

"Very delightful whims," said Julia helping herself to grapes and bread and butter.

Mr. Howard fetched his own cup and sat down close beside her. "How good of you to say that," he said. "So many people dislike everything that is not quite customary and make no pretence of hiding their dislike."

"Only disagreeable people," said Julia, stirring her tea. "I assure you, Mr. Howard, there are plenty of pleasant people in England, in Blankhampton for that matter. By-the-bye, have you made any acquaintances here yet?"

"Yes, a few. Mr. and Miss de Lisle were here yesterday."

"Oh! yes." Julia's tone was a little frozen, for but three days before Mina de Lisle had professed herself very doubtful if her mother meant to call upon the new-comers or not. "Meant to have the first chance," ran Julia's thoughts, as she looked at the handsome young man beside her.

"You live in the town, Miss Trafford," he said looking up quickly so that their eyes met.

"Yes," she answered — then suddenly asked, "How did you know that we lived in the town?"

"Because I saw you in a shop the other day and I asked who you were."

Julia's eyes fell and her colour rose. "Really,"

she murmured, then laughed a little. "Yes—and——"

"And the people told me where you lived and—and——" he broke off short there and stretched out his hand for the three-sided dish. "Have some more grapes, Miss Trafford," he said in quite a different voice.

Now Miss Trafford was a young lady who was singularly like her astute mother in several respects, one of which was that under very few circumstances did she forget the advantage of keeping an eye to the main chance. In this instance she helped herself to grapes and then looked up at him again. "What were you going to say and why didn't you say it?" she demanded.

Mr. Stephen Howard looked a little confused. "Oh," he said at last, not looking at her but confining his attention to the fruit on his plate —"Oh! because you would think me such an ass."

"An ass—well, so I might," said she coolly. "But then I might think you a much greater one if you leave me in the dark, you know."

"Well"—still he hesitated a little—"I went round to have a look at your house."

Julia stared at him in unqualified amazement. "You went to have a look at our house, Mr. Howard! But why?"

"Because I wanted to see what kind of a house you lived in," he said with a charming doggedness as if, having begun a confession he meant to go

through with it and was not to be laughed out of the position which he had taken up.

And Julia sat and looked at him with all her wondering amazement plainly depicted in her eyes and on her blank face—then somehow the fire in his handsome blue eyes communicated itself to her and she turned a sudden rich crimson colour which spread all over her face and for the moment made her look really pretty.

"What an extraordinary idea," she murmured confusedly.

"Yes. I know it was an awful piece of impertinence," said he coaxingly, "but don't be angry at it, Miss Trafford. I'm only a savage you know."

"A very well educated savage," she rejoined, "especially in the art of flattery."

"I did not mean it for flattery," he said quietly.

An electric thrill shot through Julia's not very susceptible heart, and as at that moment he had to get up in answer to a summons from his sister, she had an opportunity of looking at him more closely. It was all so very unusual and extraordinary that she was too astonished almost to think. What did it mean? What could it mean? Here was this handsome young man looking into her eyes the very first time they had ever met, making her feel as she had never known what it was to feel in all her life before, saying that he had seen her, asked who she was, and had actually gone to her house to see what kind of a place she lived in—it was incredible!

In the case of Marcus Orford and her cousin Madge, circumstances had been at first pretty much the same, and in their case, when explanations came about, it had all seemed natural enough, but to have the same romance come into her life and come so unexpectedly—well, it was incredible.

He was a very handsome young man, fair as a child, with long limbs, serene blue eyes and regular features. He had charming manners too, a smooth soft voice and a very winning smile. And could it be possible that this! all this—oh! no, no. She was, she must be, dreaming.

Yet when he came back again to his chair, it did not seem like it. It is true that he did not try to take the conversation up exactly where they had left it off; but he told her how he detested Australia, that he never meant to go back there as long as he lived, that to his mind there was no place in all the world so good to live in as England, with a decent house in Town and a roomy lodge in a good hunting district.

"And you are very fond of hunting," said Julia, still struggling with the idea that she was in a fair way to making an utter fool of herself.

"Oh! yes. I am excessively fond of it, passionately so," he answered.

"And you think you will like this district?"

"Yes. I think so. But my idea is to put up here for the winter and try a season here and there. But, of course that wouldn't do if one was married.

It is best to have a settled home then—at least I think so."

"You would have the house in Town," suggested Julia.

"And could take a furnished house wherever one liked for the hunting," he added. "Well, yes, but unless I married a woman who was desperately keen on hunting herself, I shouldn't feel comfortable to drag her about the country in a perpetual state of make-shift. However, time will show all that and I have to win my wife before I need plan out which is the best thing to do for her."

Meantime Mrs. Markham was talking about her brother to Mrs. Trafford. "He is such a dear boy, she was saying, "so kind and so thoughtful, really sometimes I think that no woman was ever so utterly blessed with husband and brother as I am."

"And he lives with you?" said Mrs. Trafford, stealing an interested glance at the handsome young man who was evidently engrossed with Julia.

"Ah! well, I can hardly say that," Mrs. Markham answered. "At least we have never arranged or said that he should live with us, but practically he does—anyway he is always here."

"And he came to England with you?"

"Oh! no—he has been a year in England—doing London," said Mrs. Markham with an expressive look. "But as soon as we got into this house, he turned up and says he means to stop for the present."

At this point Mr. Markham went over to talk to

Julia and Mr. Howard rose and came to Mrs. Trafford and his sister. "What are you telling Mrs. Trafford about me, Maimie?" he said, as he sat down near to them.

"My dear boy," said his sister, "I was telling Mrs. Trafford what a horrid nuisance you are to Bob and me, and begging her to help me to get you married and then we should have our house to ourselves."

She laughed as she spoke and Mrs. Trafford joined in the laugh as if it was the newest and most original joke in the world.

Mr. Howard, however, did not seem to see any joke at all but turned his blue eyes upon his sister very gravely. "There is many a true word spoken in jest, my dear," he said quietly, "and as you have invoked Mrs. Trafford's good offices, I hope you gave me a respectable character, apart from the fact of my being a nuisance to you and Bob."

"The best of characters, Mr. Howard," said Mrs. Trafford smiling.

The little woman got up then and declared that they really must be going—they had stayed quite an unconscionable time, had made, in fact, quite a visitation, and although they had promised themselves to make at least half a dozen calls that afternoon they would not be able to make more than one now.

"It is delightful for us that you have not managed to go to all the others," said Mrs. Markham.

"Cannot we persuade you to leave the other one also?" suggested her husband.

"No, really we ought to go now," said Mrs. Trafford gaily. "But if you go in to the Parish on Sunday, won't you come and see us when you leave? We are always at home on Sundays from five to seven—do come."

"Oh! yes, with pleasure," said Mrs. Markham and as if she meant it.

They said good-bye then and Mr. Howard went out to the door with them, which they reached just as a carriage drew up at the steps. There was a very smart lady inside it, a lady beautifully dressed and fair to look upon, who waved a dainty hand to Mrs. Trafford and expressed much pleasure at seeing her. "How unfortunate that I should be just coming as you are going," she cried.

"Dear Lady Lucifer," said Mrs. Trafford tenderly, "it is a pity—but really we have made such a visitation that——"

"Oh! Mrs. Trafford, do go back again. My sister will be enchanted," put in Mr. Howard.

But Mrs. Trafford was firm — judicious little woman! "No, no, Mr. Howard, I won't begin by paying your sister such a poor compliment as that. No. I really must go now. If you come in to the Parish on Sunday, do come in and have a cup of tea," she added to Lady Lucifer.

"Yes, I will, thanks," Lady Lucifer answered. "I shall have some people with me, but you won't mind I know."

"I shall be charmed," said Mrs. Trafford.

Lady Lucifer betook herself and her smart

garments into the house then and Mr. Howard handed the ladies into their fly.

"You will come in on Sunday then?" said Mrs. Trafford as he shut the door.

Stephen Howard leaned his arms on the side of the cab and looked coolly at Mrs. Trafford with his lazy blue eyes. "It's a long time to Sunday, Mrs. Trafford," he remarked.

Mrs. Trafford laughed and Julia turned scarlet. Howard's lazy blue eyes turned to her face for a moment, then turned back to Mrs. Trafford's again.

"It is only four days," she answered, "but if you like to come before that, why do so. We shall be very glad to see you."

"Will you?" he asked, with a shade more eagerness in his tone and a shade less laziness in his eyes. "May I come to-morrow?"

Again he stole a glance at Julia. Julia looked the other way.

"Yes, you may come to-morrow," said Mrs. Trafford with her own little indulgent air.

"Thank you—I will," said Mr. Howard gratefully.

He stepped back from the side of the cab then and made a sign to the driver to go on—and he stood bare-headed on the steps with the afternoon sun playing peep-bo among his thick golden curls—a truly personable young man, with charming manners.

"What a handsome fellow, Julie," said Mrs. Trafford.

"Yes," said Julia, who was in too much of a tumult mentally to be able to talk much.

"Charming manners too," Mrs. Trafford went on.

"Yes," said Julia.

"But these new countries are rapid, very rapid," said Mrs. Trafford, thoughtfully.

"Yes," said Julia finding her voice at last. "But I daresay it is all manner and probably he is saying just the same to Lady Lucifer now."

"It seemed to me he was a little cavalier to Lady Lucifer," said Mrs. Trafford quietly. "And I think she noticed it too."

"Then she will try all the harder to bring him to her feet that she may make him suffer for it," rejoined Julia, rather acidly.

"Oh! that is very likely," said Mrs. Trafford; "these young married women who marry men so much older than themselves seem as if their greed for admiration is never satisfied. It is a pitiable thing to live for."

"But pleasant enough when you can get it," laughed Julia. Mrs. Trafford gave vent to her feelings by a little sigh. It was a very small and feeble sigh, smothered at its birth and smuggled away under the disguise of a yawn. Oh! if only Julia were not so—so inclined to be tart, to take a caustic view of every side of life, Mrs. Trafford felt sure that with a little tact and management this handsome and agreeable young man might be brought into the fold of matrimony and her anxiety about her one remaining flower would be at an end and she would be free, gay little widow woman that sne was, to hie herself to London-town and take a

dear wee little flat—perhaps an *entresol* in Victoria Street—and make a delightful centre-place for her three dear children to meet at and look upon as home. If only Julia's sharp tongue did not spoil everything!

CHAPTER IV.

STEPHEN HOWARD'S PAST.

"We spake of many a vanished scene,
And what we once had thought and said,
Of what had been and might have been,
And who was changed and who was dead."
—*The Fire of Driftwood.*

I DO not hesitate to say that Julia Trafford had never passed such a night as the one which followed her first visit to Mrs. Bob Markham, in all her life. She could not get Stephen Howard's lazy blue eyes and soft voice with its sweet Australian accents out of her head. She was impressed with the idea that he was more than ordinarily attracted by her and yet she could not believe it.

She had no very great opinion of herself, and a very small and contemptuous one of her looks, and being very shrewd and sensible—like her mother—she could not believe that things really were as they seemed. And yet, try as she would she could not shut her eyes or her senses to the truth that this Stephen Howard had lingered beside her until his brother-in-law had come and turned him out, that he had detained them at the door just as long

as they would stop in spite of the attractions of the beautiful Lady Lucifer, who had but just gone in and might reasonably expect him to follow her as soon as courtesy to his sister's visitors would allow. Yet he had seemed in no hurry, in no hurry for anything except to see her again.

And yet—Julia was in her own room tidying her hair and dressing for dinner, and she went quickly to the glass and scanned herself closely. She turned the gas bracket so as to throw a full light upon her face and then after a long look at herself, she shut her lips tightly and shook her head—"No, it is incredible," she murmured. "It cannot be. I'm such a little ugly thing." And yet as she bustled about to wash her hands and change her frock she began to think about him again—naturally enough, for excitements of that kind had not often come into Julia Trafford's life, and to do her justice, she was not one of those girls who fancied a love-affair when no love-affair was there. But this Stephen Howard—Stevie, Mrs. Markham had called him—was such a handsome fellow and he had looked straight at her with his blue lazy eyes and—and just then Julia, who was buttoning her gown, walked to the dressing-table and without meaning to do so, looked full at herself. For a moment she was quite startled by herself—she looked so bright, so like her younger sister who was very pretty, considered lovely indeed since she had become Lady Staunton, and she had such a pretty colour in her cheeks, such a light in her eyes,

such charming curves to her lips and—and really the hitherto despised little teapot spout of a nose did not, to use the phraseology of Julia's own thoughts, look half bad.

For a moment she laughed like a pleased child, then she pressed her hands to her flushed cheeks and her perplexed eyes and asked herself aloud, "Heavens, can I be dreaming or am I going cracked or what?" and then the gong sounded below and she hastily finished her toilette and hurried down the stairs.

Still she could not get the young man out of her head. Mrs. Trafford, as was natural, was full of the new people and talked indeed about little or nothing else. "Everything so nice and yet no show," she said complacently—"indeed there was no sign of ostentatiousness excepting perhaps the footmen."

"And everybody would have powdered footmen if they could afford it," remarked Julia drily.

"Yes, you are right, Julia—at least, I am sure *I* should," the little widow cried with her airiest laugh. "They must be very rich," she added in a different tone.

"Why?"

"Because nobody who was not very rich would have dreamt of setting up such an establishment of servants as they seem to have."

"Oh! I should think they were rich," said Julia carelessly.

She thought far less about their money than she

did about Mr. Stephen Howard, in fact, she did not give a thought to the money at all except when Mrs. Trafford mentioned it; but she went to bed and tossed feverishly about through all that long long night, haunted by a pair of lazy blue eyes and a wonder whether he would find his way to St. Eve's on the morrow or not?

And in the morning she got up feeling like a limp rag and looking—well, so that when she saw herself in the glass, she fairly groaned.

"Have you a head-ache dear?" Mrs Trafford asked the moment after Julia entered the morning-room.

"Yes, I have rather a head-ache," she answered.

"Poor child. I hope it won't be worse as the day goes on," Mrs. Trafford said in commiserating tones. "Have a cup of tea, dear, and try to eat something. Nothing will carry it away so soon."

Thus bidden Julia sat down at the table and after a very respectable meal announced that she felt a good deal better.

"Then," said Mrs. Trafford, "keep yourself very quiet this morning and most likely it will pass away. I have one or two little matters to see after and I have to go into the town, so you will be quite undisturbed."

She very soon went out and then Julia tucked herself up on the comfortable roomy sofa in the morning-room and tried to make up for the ill effects of her bad night, not only tried but succeeded so thoroughly that when Mrs. Trafford returned two

hours later, she peeped into the room and found her eldest flower fast asleep.

It was wonderful what that sleep did for Julia. She felt quite like another being, and did full justice to her lunch, for Mrs. Trafford remarked, "There is nothing like food for nervous exhaustion, which is the proper name for half the headaches there are, my dear."

And then Julia went upstairs and dressed herself in a nice smart tailor gown of dark green cloth—rifle-green I believe they call it—with some handsome gold lace work about the collar and cuffs of it, and put on her out-door coat and hat. "But, my dear child," exclaimed Mrs. Trafford, when she made her appearance in the drawing-room, "you are *never* going out?"

"Oh, my head is all right now, Mother dear," said Julia, going to the long glass and pulling the edge of the strip of gold-beaded net which she wore for a veil well down over the tip of her little pert nose. "I am only going down to Mason's to see about my shoes. I shall be back before tea-time."

"Oh, very well; I am not going out again," said Mrs. Trafford in a casual kind of tone.

It was remarkable of this mother and daughter that they never laid aside the mask which they habitually wore. If a thing were too extravagant for them to think of, they never said so. If some desire were unattainable, they never said as much; they always spoke, even to each other, as if they did not care about it. This afternoon the same thought

was in the heart of each, and the thought took the form of Stephen Howard. When Mrs. Trafford exclaimed, "My dear child, you are *never* going out?" she meant to say, "Have you forgotten that Mr. Howard is coming?" and when Julia replied that her head was better and that she should be back before tea-time, she intended to convey that she had not in way forgotten that they were expecting a certain visitor, but that she was going out on purpose to be out when he should arrive.

And sure enough, when Stephen Howard knocked at the door of No. 7 St. Eve's, which he did about four o'clock, he found only Mrs. Trafford sitting alone in the bright and cosy drawing-room, a bright fire burning in the well-polished grate, and her deft little hands busy as usual with some crimson silk socks.

He cast a glance round the room as if in search of someone whom at first sight he had not perceived. "I am all alone, Mr. Howard," said Mrs. Trafford, in her most friendly and hospitable manner—"Julia has gone out—did you come by way of the High Street? Yes! Ah! I wonder you did not meet her."

"No, I never saw her," said he, and it was evident both from his looks and his tone that he was disappointed.

"Ah! She will be here presently," said Mrs. Trafford with bland indulgence, much as she might have done if Julia was the acknowledged beauty of the town and this one of a score of her luckless adorers.

It was an admirable manner that particular manner of Mrs. Trafford's, and she pointed to an exceedingly comfortable chair not very far from her own.

"Sit down and tell me what you think about Blankhampton," she said, "or, stay, do you mind ringing the bell for me first?"

Mr. Howard rang the bell, and then sat down in the chair.

"I suppose you are not in a great hurry?" she said kindly.

"Oh! not at all," he answered.

"That is all right. Oh! Cox," as the spruce parlour-maid appeared, "we will have tea as soon as Miss Trafford comes in."

"Yes, Ma'am," said Cox.

"And now," said Mrs. Trafford to her visitor, "tell me how you like Blankhampton."

"Immensely," he replied promptly. "At present better than any place I was ever in in all my life."

"Better than Australia?" said Mrs. Trafford, smiling, as she plied her knitting-needles.

"Oh! yes, far and away. In fact Australia is a loathsome country. I hate every inch of it."

"Really! And yet you were born there?"

"Which perhaps is why I detest it so thoroughly,' said he quickly. "Very likely, if I had been born in Blankhampton, I should dislike it as much as now I like it."

"Yes, that is very likely," Mrs. Trafford returned. "I think with most young people there is a great longing for fresh fields and pastures new, and it is

only when you have been a long time away from the place where you were born and grew up that you have a sentimental feeling about it which makes you yearn to go back once more."

"Yes, you are right," he answered; "and in my case, when my longing for a sight of Australia comes over me, I shall make longing do instead of going."

"Oh! is it so bad as that?" Mrs. Trafford cried.

"Worse than that," replied Mr. Howard, instantly.

"But why? What is there so bad about the country?" she asked. "What can there be so different about England to make you feel like that about it?"

Mr. Howard grew grave. "Well, to tell you the truth, Mrs. Trafford," he said, "I never knew a really happy day in Australia until the day my father died. He is dead, and they say we ought not to speak ill of the dead, but in his case I cannot help it. He was the most unutterable brute I ever knew or heard of in all my life. I never could see, I have never been able to see, that he had a single redeeming quality—he was all bad from first to last. I hated him, I despised him, I loathed him Perhaps it is wrong of me to tell you all this, but at least it is candid. Our mother was the sweetest, best, kindest, gentlest of women—Maimie and I worshipped her. *He* killed her."

"Killed your mother?" cried Mrs. Trafford with the utmost horror depicted on her face.

Stephen Howard gave a short hard laugh. "Oh! I don't mean that he cut her throat or broke her

neck. He might have been hanged for that, even in the wilds of Australia. No, he just stopped short of that, but more than once he had a near shave, and only held his coward's hand just in time. And at last, when I was sixteen, my mother died—his victim—the victim of the greatest brute I ever knew. I ought not to tell you all this, Mrs. Trafford, I daresay you will despise and distrust me for it, but—but—you are not unlike my mother, and I—I had to tell you somehow."

"I understand—I know exactly," Mrs. Trafford murmured soothingly. "Why should you not tell me? And I am deeply interested."

The excitement died out of the young man's blue eyes, and he stretched out his hand to her. "How kind you are," he said. "Mrs. Trafford, do you know that your daughter is so like my poor little mother—like what I remember her as a child, when I was a little youngster of ten or twelve, you know."

"Ah! yes," Mrs. Trafford murmured. "Yes?" she repeated. Light began to dawn upon what had hitherto been dark. She wanted to know more.

"I was sixteen when my mother died, worn out with the brutality she had borne for more than twenty years. She wasn't forty years old then, and often and often I used to wonder how she had ever borne it so long. After that, there were three, nearly four years of—of——" he broke off short, as if the word he was going to use for a comparison was just on the tip of his tongue and he had bitten

it off at the very point of utterance—"of misery," he went on, "such as I could not describe to you if I would, and I would not if I could. And then, thank God, my father died and I began to live."

"And you were provided for?" Mrs. Trafford asked. She had dropped her knitting upon her lap and sat looking like one fascinated at the handsome young man with such a sad history in his past.

"Oh yes, he left plenty of money, and Maimie and I shared it equally," Stephen Howard answered carelessly.

There was a moment's silence—Mrs. Trafford broke it. "And then?" she said in a tone which signified that he was to go on.

"Then I came over here and went to Oxford," he continued. "It had always been a dream of my mother's—she was an Englishwoman, you know."

"Oh! yes—and your father——"

"Was an Australian," said Stephen Howard shortly.

"Ah! I see!" murmured Mrs. Trafford. "And you came to Oxford?"

"But I had only just entered when something went wrong with my property and I had to go back. I was just one and twenty then. And there I had to stay for more than a year. After that I made a tour through the States—then I put in six more months in Queensland and afterwards came to Europe. Then I went back and stayed five years—five years, hating it all the time, and at last with my brother-in-law's help I got rid of all my pro-

perty and put all my money into the Bank of England—then I felt safe, and before a week I had turned my back on Australia and, please God, I shall never see it again."

"I am sure," said Mrs. Trafford, "that I hope you never will. What a dreadful story—a dreadful story. But tell me, have you never sought out your mother's people?"

"My mother, so far as I know," Stephen Howard answered, "had not a relation in the world. She was a poor clergyman's daughter and after his death went out to Australia as a governess at a time when women were scarce out there. She met my father and they were married; I believe it was considered a great marriage at the time for her; poor soul she paid dear for it afterwards."

"And your father?" asked Mrs. Trafford, who was breathless with the intensity of her interest in his story.

"My father," he repeated.

"Yes—had he no relations? Forgive me for asking you such a question," she said gently, "but you have told me so much and you have interested me deeply."

"Oh! yes, why should you not ask it? Well, Mrs. Trafford, I can tell you nothing more about my father—not even if his real name was as he said, not where he was born or who his father was. He may have been a convict for aught I know."

Mrs. Trafford looked at him for a moment as he sat in an easy and careless attitude, his blue eyes

fixed on the fire. "You do not look like a convict's son," she said with a smile—"and I think you would have known if he had been that."

"Yes, I daresay I should. No, I don't think he had been a convict, though he was bad enough to have been a convict fifty times over. As for my looks—well, it is a lucky circumstance for me that I don't look like anything of that kind—but the handsomest man I ever saw in my life, Mrs. Trafford, was working among a gang of convicts at the gateway of the Infantry Barracks at Portland—the Verne, they call it."

"Yes, yes—and probably he was a gentleman who had—well, done something dreadful in the passion of the moment. Then your sister—does she feel like you about all this?"

"My sister,"—for a moment he looked puzzled. "Well, no, I don't think she does. You see she escaped those last four dreadful years. She is four years older than I am and she married Markham a few weeks before my poor mother died. And then Markham is very rich, a dear old chap all round, devoted to her and one of the best fellows in the world. So, don't you see, I think Maimie has forgotten a good deal—as perhaps when I marry I shall be able to forget too. All the same, Mrs. Trafford, I must apologise for boring you with such a long story about myself. Believe me, I have never spoken of my father even to my sister since he died—but somehow I had to tell you."

"Mr. Howard," said Mrs. Trafford laying her hand

upon his arm and speaking in her kindest voice, "I feel very grateful to you for giving me your confidence in this way. Believe me, it is not misplaced and I do not think that you will ever regret it. I am so sorry for your unhappy past. I cannot tell you how sorry. But it is all over and done with now—your sister is very wise to have put it all out of her mind, for it can never do any good to recall sorrows which can never come into your life again. Yes, yes, I know what is in your mind; you are thinking of that poor mother who suffered so much and had so little joy in her life. Well, all that has been made up to her long long ago, and most likely she knows just what you feel about her and is proud and glad that you should think of her as you do. But she would be the last to wish you to spoil your young life—for you are young yet—because hers was an unhappy one, the last to wish you to tinge your heart with the sadness which shadowed hers."

Stephen Howard shook himself together as Mrs. Trafford ceased speaking and passed his hand across his eyes as if to shut out all those memories of the past which their conversation had recalled. "Yes, you are quite right," he said very quietly, "you are quite right."

CHAPTER V.

LOVE, THE ALCHYMIST.

"True be it said, what man it sayd!
That love with gall and honey doth abound;
But if the one be with the other wayed,
For every dram of honey therein found
A pound of gall doth over it redound."

—SPENSER.

ALMOST before the words had passed his lips, the door opened and Julia Trafford walked in! She gave a pretty start of surprise when she saw who was sitting with her mother and said with a laugh—"Oh! is it you, Mr. Howard? Really I never expected that you would come."

Mr. Howard got up and went across the room to meet her. Mrs. Trafford drew a long breath and felt as if Julia's manner was one of great levity, felt as she might have felt if she had heard some one laugh in the presence of the dead. For once she had no smile for her daughter, but she picked up the crimson silk sock again and went on knitting busily with a very grave face indeed. Stephen Howard, however, seemed to have no such feeling, to notice nothing incongruous in the contrast between

his conversation with Mrs. Trafford and Julia's fresh breezy and rather noisy entrance; he took her hand in his, held it a long time, at least for a longer time than was absolutely necessary, and enquired after her health with a tenderness which made the girl's heart fairly thump with excitement.

"Has my mother given you any tea?" she asked as she unbuttoned the smart coat which matched her gown.

"Not yet," answered Mrs. Trafford, smiling at last, "I told Cox to bring it as soon as you came in."

"That is all right. My mother is quite famous in Blankhampton for her hot buttered scones, Mr. Howard. Do you know what a scone is, or are you still too much of a savage for that?"

"Still too much of a savage," he answered gaily —"but I am ignorant only because I am ignorant. I don't revel in it as some people do."

"That is good, we will instruct you carefully," Julia said smiling.

She took her hat off and ruffled her hair up with her hand. She had pretty hair, a nice brown as to colour and of a curly nature, which fell into little natural curls in crisp weather, and needed but a touch or two with the tongs to make it presentable even in the hottest part of the year. Then she folded up her veil and tucked it neatly away in the crown of her hat, knowing all the time that Stephen Howard's lazy blue eyes were watching her. Then Cox appeared with the tea, which was quite as

pretty and quite as well arranged as Mrs. Markham's had been, and Julia sat down to do the honours thereof.

Scarcely, however, had she handed his cup to him when the door opened and Mrs. Lovelace was shown in—"Captain Legard will be here in three minutes," murmured Julia to Stephen Howard. She proved to be right. Mrs. Trafford introduced him to Mrs. Lovelace, who flashed her black eyes at him with a glance of keen interest and sat down where he would be able to have a good view of her little bold face, when he should resume his seat again. And before he had done so—for Julia gave Mrs. Lovelace the cup which had been brought for her—the door opened again and Cox appeared once more, followed by Mrs. Lovelace's special admirer.

Mr. Howard got himself as near to Julia, and as far away from Mrs. Lovelace, as the size of the room and the position of the tea-tray would allow. "Does he always turn up like that?" he asked of Julia in a whisper.

"Always," said Julia with decision.

"Is he engaged to her?" he asked in the same low tone.

Julia looked horrified. "Good Heavens, Mr. Howard, she has a husband."

"You don't say so—I thought they seemed on such every-day sort of terms—didn't shake hands or anything."

"Oh, I daresay she has seen him before to-day,' said Julia carelessly.

"Yes, but what does the husband say to it?" Stephen Howard persisted.

"I don't know that he says anything—he puts up with it," Julia replied.

"Ah! Do *all* the married ladies in England do that sort of thing?" he asked.

"No, but a great many fashionable ones do—it looks so smart, you know, to have two men always about with you."

"Does your sister always have a man about with her?" he asked gravely.

"Always;" returned Julia with a gay laugh—"but it is her husband, you know! Why, they adore one another."

"I see. Then did she"—indicating Mrs. Lovelace by a look—"ever adore her husband?"

"Oh; I believe she did once. Someone told me the other day that they were the spooniest couple who ever made all their friends uncomfortable, and that Mrs. Lovelace made quite an exhibition of herself when she was first married. She has made up for it since," said Julia in a caustic tone, "for she can scarcely speak civilly to him now."

"And the other man?"

"Is in the cavalry regiment quartered here now—I don't like him."

"He is not much to look at," rejoined Howard, with a glance at Legard's heavy-featured face. "I saw him in the Cathedral gardens this afternoon as I came here."

"Yes?" said Julia, for his tone betokened

that he had had reason to notice this man particularly.

"He was talking to a lady, a young lady," Stephen Howard went on lazily—"a very pretty young lady and I thought that—well, that he looked interested to say the least of it."

"A young lady, and pretty?" repeated Julia.

"Very tall and exceedingly fair with all her hair put away from her face; and something about her gown not quite like other people's gowns. It had an old-fashioned look about it to my eyes."

"Oh; yes, yes—Pamela Winstanley, of course. Her father is one of the Canons at the Parish. Of course, they came yesterday and the Berkeleys went away. Yes—yes—but I wonder how they met, for he was not here when they were here last year."

Almost as she spoke, Cox appeared again and announced "Miss Winstanley," and the very girl of whom they had been speaking walked into the room.

Well, a girl she was not, but a woman of at least nine and twenty but by reason of her fair complexion looking a good deal younger than that. She had very nice manners a little tending towards go-aheadishness (to be very wicked and coin a word) greeted Mrs. Trafford in a clear pleasant voice and betrayed at once something more than a tendency to colloquial English.

"Ah! Claude, how are you?" she said to Mrs. Lovelace, then looked past her at Captain Legard and said with a very hail-fellow-well-met air—"I

needn't say 'How d'you do,' to you again, need I?" and then moved to the tea-table and kissed Julia with a good deal of effusion.

Before Julia had time to introduce her to Mr. Howard, she caught a quick jealous flash of Mrs. Lovelace's black eyes at Captain Legard. Then Miss Winstanley moved quickly back towards the fire and began to enquire very cordially after Mrs. Trafford's health, finally saying that she would like a cup of tea, and subsiding in the most natural way in the world into the very chair nearest to Captain Legard.

Captain Legard, as a matter of ordinary courtesy, had to attend to her wants, and did so apparently with no small amount of pleasure. Mrs. Lovelace looked as black as a thunder-cloud, and her bold little face looked as sullen as an angry child's; and it grew blacker and blacker as Captain Legard's broad shoulder was turned towards her that he might the better chat with Miss Winstanley.

"Will you put my cup down?" she said at last in a furious voice.

Captain Legard raised his eye-brows but got up with a great show of politeness and took the cup from her, which by-the-bye she might just as easily have set down upon the little table beside her; and having put it back upon the tray, he went back to his seat and took up his conversation with Miss Winstanley exactly where Mrs. Lovelace's request had broken it off.

It was altogether too much for the furious little

lady with the black eyes; she jumped up from her chair and walked over to Mrs. Trafford.

"Yes I must go thanks," she said in answer to that lady's rather lukewarm "Must you go?"—"We are dining at the Palace to-night and I have several letters to write before I dress. Good-bye—So glad to have found you in."

She contrived to whisper "Aren't you coming?" as she passed Captain Legard, in a tone which had he been her husband would have meant a bad quarter of a hour by-and-by—and in reply he answered in a rather louder tone, "Not just now," after which, with a scant adieu to Julia, Mrs. Lovelace went away.

"Mrs. Trafford and Julia looked significantly at one another, as if to say that the atmosphere was stormy, but Captain Legard sat down again beside Miss Winstanley and went on talking as if such a person as Mrs. Lovelace did not exist.

"The lady did not seem——" began Stephen Howard.

"No, exactly," rejoined Julia drily. "Mother, dear, any more tea?"

"Not any more, thanks dear," Mrs. Trafford answered, giving her attention to the crimson sock.

"You will, Pamela—it is fresh tea," said Julia, and Pamela did have another cup, and another hot buttered scone.

"Does she often look like that?" asked Stephen Howard.

"Pretty often," Julia replied.

"What a pity—for she is pretty."

"Yes—I have seen her look charming," Julia replied. "When she is pleased and all goes smooth, her own diamonds are not more bright than she is".

"Has she good diamonds? Is she a person of importance?" he said carelessly.

"Oh yes, she is a county woman," Julia replied, "and her diamonds are exquisite. When she wants to look smart she blazes like a jeweller's shop."

He went away presently with a permission to come with his sister on Sunday afternoon, and indeed to look in whenever he liked. And after a few minutes more Miss Winstanley and Captain Legard went away *together*.

"He is going home with her," cried Julia greatly excited. "Mother, *did* you see it all! She was *furious*. How silly of her to give herself away like that."

She ran to the bow window from which they could see the entire length of the street—Mrs. Lovelace, by-the-bye had rooms in the corner house on the opposite side of the way.

"They are going right past the house," Julia cried in an ecstasy of enjoyment. "And Mrs. Lovelace is standing at the drawing-room window. Oh! what a row there will be. I wonder if he, too, is dining at the Palace to-night?"

"It is very silly—I wonder that a pretty woman of standing can be so foolish as to put herself in such a position," said Mrs. Trafford secure in the dignity of having herself not so long ago refused to

marry Colonel Urquhart, the smartest commanding officer who had shed the light of his countenance on Blankhampton for many and many a day.

Mrs. Trafford went away then, but Julia sat still in the window idly watching passers by in the street and thinking a good deal about Stephen Howard. She was not so excited as she had been on the previous day, for it is wonderful how even the plainest of women and those who have long given up hoping for a leaf of romance to illumine the dull book of their lives, take to the position of queen when they find it offered to them. Already the improvement in Julia Trafford's whole person and manner was not only apparent but marked. Already it seemed as if her cheeks had bloomed afresh and had suddenly come out in dimples, she brought out quite a stock of little coquettish airs and graces admirably adapted to go with the little tip-tilted nose and curly top-knot which afore-time had been her distinguishing characteristics. And already she looked years and years younger. Surely Love is a wonderful alchymist! He turns the old lamps into new, and grinds the old young again. Not, all the same, that I wish you to infer from that I look upon Julia Trafford as being old. No—no—but she was not so young, that is so girlish, as she had been ten years before: she was seven and twenty years old, which in Blankhampton, let me tell you, where women have no pursuit but marriage and only go in for study of the arts in a very casual and dilletante-like way, is looked upon as by no means youthful.

She was still sitting in the window when she saw Captain Legard come sauntering back from the direction of the Parish. Evidently he had been in with Pamela Winstanley or else they had lingered a long time on the steps of the Residence, occupied perhaps in admiring the fine Gothic architecture of the Cathedral, familiarly called "the Parish." Perhaps they had been listening to the jackdaws cawing overhead—perhaps they had been but listening to and admiring one another.

He was walking very slowly, idly sauntering along, looking neither to right nor to left and evidently not trying to attract attention in any way. But he did attract attention, nevertheless, for as Julia watched him cross the road at the end of the street, she saw also a movement of the white lace curtains which shaded the window of Mrs. Lovelace's sitting-room and then saw the sleek dark head thrust into view as she watched him pass along.

As Julia watched, Mrs. Lovelace gave an involuntary gesture with her hand as if she would knock at the window and call him back. Then she drew back a little and the next moment Captain Legard returned into sight again, walking by the side of one of the Mauleverer sisters, at that time Mrs. Lovelace's most intimate friend.

"He is going there with her," thought Julia with quite a sigh of relief, a sigh that was surely the greatest proof of all of the power of the alchymist Love.

But no! They stopped at the door of the house at the corner and Miss Mauleverer rang the bell—then turned back to him and apparently asked him to go in also. Captain Legard, however, shook his head and when the door was opened took Miss Mauleverer's hand, lifted his hat and slowly sauntered away again without so much as a glance at the window above. By the quiver of the lace curtains Julia saw that Mrs. Lovelace was still there. "What a shame," she found herself murmuring indignantly.

CHAPTER VI.

OUT FOR A RAMBLE.

"A large portion of mankind have something of shame about them. And all such persons feel an instinctive aversion and dread towards anyone whom they believe can see through them."

—WHATELY.

WITHOUT actually putting her thoughts into words, Mrs. Trafford decided that she would make her next Sunday afternoon quite a party. She did indeed say to Julia that they would ask a few people to come in after the Parish, and she wrote a few notes to such men in the neighbourhood as were available, among them various soldiers quartered in the garrison, and Gerard de Lisle; also Mr. de Lisle's bosom friend, one Anthony Mauleverer, a young

man of distinguished appearance, delightful manners and the general air of a stage brigand. I believe he was utterly innocent of any desire to shine in that way and that thus his appearance was against him, but without doubt he was, looked at from a matrimonial point of view, a detrimental of the most pronounced type. Yet Mrs. Trafford made a good deal of fuss over him—illnatured people said because he was first cousin to the Mauleverers. The three spinsters who lived in St. Eve's, a few doors from No. 7, called Mrs. Trafford "a pushing little person, who is always trying to know US," and would not let themselves slip into visiting terms with her at any price.

As a general thing only about half-a-dozen people found their way to No. 7 St. Eve's after the Parish, but on extra occasions it was wonderful how large a gathering Mrs. Trafford was able to get together, without having made a formal party. On this particular afternoon, for instance, it was wonderful to notice how long she lingered to speak just a word with her acquaintances in the outer courts—otherwise the Nave—of the Parish, and how twice on her way to her pew—no, I mean her stall—she stopped to whisper a single sentence to two rather important ladies, "Come in after the service," and then went up and, so to speak, devotionally buried herself, following every word of the familiar service with large book and double gold eye-glass held some six or eight inches from the end of her nose. Without doubt, although I have come to have the

tenderest affection for Mrs. Trafford since I first began to write about her, she was taken all round quite a study, an interesting study.

Then after service was over, she and Julia separated and each gathered in a few more recruits as she went homewards, so that by the time Mrs. Bob Markham, with Bob and Stephen Howard in tow, found her way to No. 7, quite a bustle was going on and the sound of many voices greeted them as they went up the stair.

Stephen Howard found that Julia was too busy with the tea tray to do more for him than smile brightly and ask him to help her with the cups, and whilst he was handing cups and a plate of neatly rolled bread and butter from one to the other, he became aware that Mrs. Lovelace, gorgeously dressed in black with gold embroideries, was flirting desparately with two young officers, and that Captain Legard and Miss Pamela Winstanley were snugly ensconced in the window, Legard with his back to the company, Miss Pamela facing him, with gratified pride of possession written on every line of her fair and rather mean though pretty face.

"H'm," ran Stephen Howard's thoughts, "trust a woman to dig the knife in deep when once she has found the spot where another woman flinches."

A little farther away Mrs. Trafford was talking to Lady Lucifer and her new friend Mrs. Markham.

"What are those large rooms just at the end of the street?" Mrs. Markham was saying.

"Oh! those are the Assembly Rooms, the best ball-rooms in England," answered Mrs. Trafford.

"The very place for millionaires like you to give balls in, Maimie," laughed Lady Lucifer.

Mrs. Trafford opened her eyes somewhat to thus hear the extremely exclusive Lady Lucifer address the Australian lady by her Christian name, but evidently Mrs. Bob was quite used to the familiarity, for she patted Lady Lucifer's hand and answered, "Now don't chaff me like that, Violet. You know very well we are not millionaires—we are just comfortably off. All the same, I should like to give a ball in those rooms. It wouldn't be half the trouble of having it in one's own house and not half the trouble for one's friends either. But I must get to know a few more people first."

"Oh! I will send out the invitations for you!" suggested Lady Lucifer gaily.

But Mrs. Markham looked doubtful. "I'm told that people do that in London, but I don't think Bob would like it. It would look like trying to push ourselves into society on your shoulders, and old friends as you and I are I don't think it would be quite fair to do that."

"Well, put it off a little till you see how you like the place for hunting," suggested her ladyship good-naturedly, "and when you do want to give a ball, I will help you all I can."

"Yes, that is more like it," answered Mrs. Markham—then turned to Mrs. Trafford—"You did not

know that Lady Lucifer and I were girls together, did you?"

"No, indeed," answered Mrs. Trafford, deeply interested.

"But that is so. Lady Lucifer's father, Sir Ranald Tempest, was Governor of Queensland—five years was he there, Violet?"

"Yes, five years," Lady Lucifer answered, "five of the happiest years of my life, and Maimie Howard was the dearest friend I made during the whole time I was there."

"How delightful to meet again and be neighbours after so many years," murmured Mrs. Trafford, and then leaving them to enjoy each other's society, she moved away to speak to others of her visitors.

She was more than conscious of a feeling that Mrs. Markham must be a very kind as well as a very well-bred woman or she would have told Colonel Coles—who, by-the-bye, had just got promotion and was a Major-General now, which probably meant that he would soon be home from India—that she had little or no need of a letter of introduction to anybody in or near Blankhampton, being an old friend of one of the smartest and most powerful ladies in the whole of the county. "I feel that I shall like Mrs. Markham," Mrs. Trafford said to herself as she approached Lady Margaret Adair, the Dean's wife, who was in the pre-occupied state of a woman trying to do two things at once; one was to listen to Mrs. Fairlie, who had her most pronounced society voice and manner on, the other

was to keep her eye on Mr. Anthony Mauleverer and her own pretty daughter, who had drawn nearer to each other than Lady Margaret quite liked.

I may be wrong and misguided in every way, but I cannot understand how any man or woman can get tired of the study of people. Those who live in the whirl of London Society, whether it is solely and strictly the Society of Fashion or the Society of Wit, naturally after a long spell, grow tired of Society itself, of going out day after day and night after night, from drum to dinner and dinner to crush, to say nothing of lunches and theatres thrown in, with all the unutterable fag of paying calls, leaving paste-boards, sitting out matineés and recitals, looking in at bazaars and other charity functions. One may get tired and fagged with all these, but to me the study of the human kind remains just as interesting as at first. In my case I fly to green trees and pleasant fields—at this moment I am writing in a house from which you cannot see another dwelling with the exception of a cottage or small farm-house on the slope of rising ground half-a-mile away. All I ask here is to be let alone, to have no dinners, no teas, no society But people are just as interesting (*when* I come across them) as ever.

For instance the other day, wife and I went out to look at a set of harness which we had heard was for sale at the stable of a neighbouring parson. But ye gods, how our pride suffered before we got home again! But I will tell you about it!

We started from home with a clever little Welsh pony fleet and sound, and a smart cart borrowed from our friend the Inn-keeper. We flattered ourselves that we looked presentable, or if not so grand as that, at least respectable. I have always thoroughly believed myself to be a man of passable appearance and my wife is a happy-looking buxom person who thinks she looks as if she did not belong to the labouring class—I mean the hard-working class.

Well, we set off in the best of health and spirits, pointed out to each other this old farm-house, that pretty bit of landscape, till we reached the first village—let us call it Cornby. There we posted our letters for the day and left an order at the butcher's, then went gaily through what they call in these parts "the Street" and took what the natives call "the fust tarn to the right."

"That is the Hall, I should think," said Nell to me—the Hall meant the house of our landlord.

"I should think it is—it's a pretty place," said I—and by-the-by I think I ought to mention here that we had only been a week or so in possession of our new retreat.

About half a mile further on down a steep dip in the road we met—a person! He was of the masculine gender and looked like a naval man, except for his manners. He was a fine fellow, big and stalwart, dressed in well-made heather-mixture shooting clothes, showing a pair of brawny legs which certainly would have had a fine chance of a prize or at

least of honourable mention at a show for understandings! He was goodish looking too, had a pair of handsome eyes and a brown beard cut, after the fashion of naval men, close to his face. Over his shoulder he carried a tennis-racket to which were slung a pair of tennis-shoes. One perhaps could not expect much in the way of manners from a gentleman who was going to a lady's tennis-party clad in a garb fit for Scotch moors, but be that as it may, this gallant accosted us, pulled us up with an imperative wave of his hand and said: "Haw! Do you know which is Cornby Hall?"

"No," said I, thinking he might at least have touched his hat to the lady in my cart. "I am almost a stranger about here and I really don't know."

The gallant looked at me as if he thought I was dreaming or drunk. "Don't you know where it is?" he persisted.

"No, I don't," said I, "I believe it's somewhere near the village. The village is a mile or so further on."

"Oh——" a pause, then he pointed to the old red brick house which we had passed and spoken of. "Is that the house?"

"I don't know," said I shortly.

I signified to the Welsh pony that she might go on and the gentleman with the legs strode forward with a curt "——nks" flung over his shoulder as if we had done him a special and personal injury because we did not happen to know where Cornby Hall was.

My wife turned and looked after him as he swung along the road, then looked at me with resentful eyes. "He must have taken us for some of the country people," she said, then, as I laughed, added indignantly, "But even if he did he might have touched his hat."

"Particularly as he stopped our trap," said I with a laugh.

"Yes," she answered, and after a minute or two she burst out, "What a snob!"

A few days afterwards we had occasion to call on the lady at Cornby Hall ourselves, and found to our joy that it was some way beyond where we had met our courteous friend with the legs, that he had then come at least half a mile past the house, and as Nell said to me, "We must have sent him a mile and a half out of his road," and then she added vindictively, "Thank Heaven!"

I might tell a great deal about the reverend gentlemen (Shades of courtesy and chivalry forgive me for using the already degraded term to such an one), to whom that set of harness belonged. I might indeed give him a whole chapter to himself if I chose, but my Blankhampton people are waiting, so a few words will suffice for him. In truth I think that I need only say one thing, which is that he had the true parson idea of his own importance—and I feel that as I myself was brought up in the bosom of the Church I am at liberty to know a parson when I see him a trifle better than many people. The time may come—and I sincerely trust

it will—when I shall see my great Clerical Staff College an accomplished fact. Mr. Walter Besant has not had to live many years to see his "All Sorts and Conditions of Men" grow into a reality. Why not I also? I may say but one thing about what I shall do when that day comes—I shall of course, as the Founder and Originator of the Institution be made a Life-Governor, with permanent gift of a bed, so to speak. Well, I shall give my first nomination to my bargain-driving friend who was the owner of that secondhand set of harness, and I shall except nobody, not even John, by Divine Providence, Lord Bishop of Blackhampton. There will be hundreds of subscribers eager and anxious to provide for *him*.

Well, to go back to the point from which I started—and I hope the critics (especially my dear friend, Blue Stocking, who sits in such merciless judgment upon all of us poor scribblers, Heaven help her and us), will not be too hard upon my discursiveness; if they feel inclined to be so let me recommend them to go and do better, if they can—I was going to say that one of the most singular bits of information which one learns from a study of the human being is to see how thoroughly it pays to assume the position which one wishes to take in the estimation of other people, and how the majority of those people take you at your own valuation.

At this moment I know a literary woman—no, my friend, I am not going to give you the smallest clue

to her identity, so you need not look for it. She is honoured, fêted, quoted as a celebrity of great distinction, and yet everybody whom I know—and I have a very large acquaintance in the Society of Wit—ends by asking the same questions, "By-the-bye have you ever *read* anything of hers? What has she written?" It was very much in this way with Mrs. Fairlie! She was a pretty woman, with a sharp hatchet-like face—still distinctly pretty, mind—a terrible figure and worse feet. Yet she came as a bride to Blankhampton, where remember the majority of the girls were more than pretty, and she took up the position of the beauty of the place. Nobody quite knew how she did it—certainly not because she was the prettiest woman in the town. I could mention twenty at this moment who were infinitely more beautiful in face and I doubt if I could find one who was worse in build. Nor was it that she dressed well—on the contrary I think she was generally rather badly turned out, with often a skirt that did not match itself all round, and once I saw her at a particularly smart function, in the shape of a concert at which all the rank and fashion of the neighbourhood had gathered itself together, in a dark silk gown with an extraordinary arrangement of white muslin adown the front of her bodice and up the sleeves to the elbow, which looked exactly as if she had been at a school of cookery earlier in the day and had not had time to change her frock.

Yet undeniably Mrs. Fairlie had the position in

the town of being quite the beauty of the place, some indeed went so far as to call her "the Blankhampton Lily," and I have heard her termed "the Parish Lily"—which I confess was hard on the lady. The very last time that I had the pleasure (and it was a pleasure) of seeing Mrs. Fairlie, it was in the High Street at Blankhampton. I had not seen her for some little time. I had always been used to seeing a sight out of the common, but I admit on this particular morning the dazzling nature of her Blankhampton Lily-ness fairly took my breath away.

She is tall and thin—were she not a beauty, she might be called lanky—and she was dressed in black, not in mourning though. She had a very tall hat and very short skirts, very smart boots with very high heels. She had also a Pompadour stick with a big silver knob on top. Behind ran a huge black poodle, a lovely brute, shaven and shorn and fluffed and curled till he most of anything resembled a yew-tree, as you see them clipt in old-fashioned gardens. Round his neck he wore a massive silver collar with a row of silver bells big enough for a pony, and round each of his semi-shaven black legs a silver bangle. It was a wonderful sight, and had the poodle been as much alive to the beauty and importance of possessing such a mistress as his mistress certainly was of having such a dog, why he would have walked sedately in front or have followed demurely behind. As it was it was plain to see that that poodle-dog had no pride—he

declined all control, and shewed no sense of decency whatever. Away he raced down the dirty street, oblivious of a long and dainty toilette just completed, forgetful of his dignity and bangles alike, to say nothing of his silver collar and jingling bells, and his mistress might, and did, call and coax in vain, might flourish her silver-topped Pompadour stick and look for all the world like a barn-door hen standing at the edge of the pond into which her clutch of ducklings have boldly plunged unheeding alike of her fear and her distress. It was a touching sight—I shall never forget it! And the last I saw of that depraved and mindless poodle-dog, he was lying on his back in the middle of a muddy street romping and playing leap-frog with a dirty little mongrel, who looked altogether too disreputable to belong to anybody. If the Blankhampton Lily took that dog home and gave him a sound beating I do not think that I should find it in my heart to blame her, though I am not an advocate for beating at any time.

Well, I have rambled off a long way from Mrs. Trafford's little party—I apologise dear Reader and hope I have not bored you by the way. We will go back to the pretty drawing-room at No 7 and try to pick up the thread of affairs just where we let it slip! What—all gone? Why surely I had forgotten how late it had got before I took you that long journey just to make the acquaintance of a mannerless man with a pair of brawny legs and a pompous little country parson whom I didn't think worth

describing to you. Well, well, forgive me this time and I will try to keep a tight grip of my story during the rest of the way over which we mean to travel together.

CHAPTER VII.

A VISIT TO MATCHAM!

"Wealth and the high estate of pride
With what untimely speed they glide
How soon depart!
Bid not the shadowy phantoms stay,
The vassals of a mistress they
Of fickle heart."

—COPLAS DE MANSIQUE.

A FEW days afterwards a little note came by hand from Lady Lucifer to the little lady at No. 7 St. Eves.

"My dear Mrs. Trafford," it said—"We are having a large party at Matcham for shooting next week, and it will give Lord Lucifer and myself much pleasure if you and Miss Trafford will come to us from the 21st to the 28th of the month. Mr. and Mrs. Markham and Mr. Howard will be with us then. I know you will find it pleasant to meet them. If you can give the man who brings this note an answer it will be a convenience to me, as I should like to know before post time if you can come or not.

"My dear Mrs. Trafford, yours sincerely, Violet Lucifer."

Now it happened that Julia was not at home when her mother received and opened this letter. Mrs. Trafford did not hesitate about what answer she should make. She went to her little desk and wrote a sweet note to her dear Lady Lucifer to the effect that she and Julia would be charmed to come to Matcham on the 21st of the month.

"Very sweet, I'm sure, of Lady Lucifer to think of us," she said as she saw the admirable Cox go out to the groom waiting on horseback at the door. "I wish Julia would come in."

She saw that Cox asked the man some question for he took the note and still waited while Cox went back into the house, re-appearing in two or three minutes with a tall glass of beer on a neat little tray.

"Really Cox is an admirable and valuable servant," murmured Mrs. Trafford.

She was not sorry to have a groom in the Lucifer livery standing for a time at her door. Mrs. Trafford always had half an eye to effect on the Mauleverer spinsters three doors away.

How she did wish Julia would come home, but the minutes went by and Julia, who was at that moment in the principal music-shop of the town turning over the latest songs, did not make her appearance and her mother had to possess her soul in such patience as she could. Just before lunch-time, however, she came, to hear the great news and to say with something like dismay—"Mother, dear, I really don't see how I am to go without a frock or two."

Now Mrs. Trafford had but lately had two smart

weddings to drain her slender purse, and Julia was a good girl who never put her mother about in the way of expenditure if she could help it. But Mrs. Trafford was a wise and skilful general; she knew when to hold her hand and when to pile on all her strength, and she laughed at Julia's dismayed face.

"Oh, my dear, you must have frocks and so on," she said. "You know we do not go to Lord Lucifer's to stay every day. I shall not need much—I shall have a new tea-gown for I really want a new one apart from this visit. But I think that is all, nobody will look much at me. But with you it is different; you must have a couple of evening gowns and a new morning-frock, and anything else that you want."

"It is awfully extravagant," protested Julia.

"It is imperative, my dear," returned Mrs. Trafford in a tone which did not admit of argument.

Yet all the same, she felt that it was good of her girl to be willing even to think of cost at such a time. "Nobody has such good children as I have," she said to herself, and her thoughts included her niece, Madge, as one of her children just as much as her own daughter, Laura.

Immediately after lunch they went off to the dressmaker and held a consultation with her. "I will have something quite inexpensive, Mother," said Julia, as they went. "I can get something very smart in soft silk or cashmere, and you must have your tea-gown of a rich material."

"I suppose I must," said Mrs. Trafford doubtfully.

She was a very unselfish little woman, and would

have gone cheerfully to pay her grand visit without so much as a new pair of gloves in order that one of her girls might be freshly dressed and well finished off in all the little details of her costume. But Julia was unselfish too, and Julia insisted upon the material for the tea-gown being of a rich and suitable kind, and arranged fully with the dressmaker that the trimmings should be neither poor nor skimped. Oh yes, they were good girls, not a doubt about it.

Well, on the appointed day Mrs. Trafford and Julia set off for Matcham, a matter of ten miles or so by rail and three or four beyond that by road. They were very happy, the mother and daughter; the mother because she was going to stay a week at one of the smartest houses in the county, the daughter because *he* would be there!

They had seen a good deal of *him* during the time between the little afternoon gathering after the service at the Parish and the day on which they found themselves at the station for Matcham, but though they had got on like—like a house on fire Julia would have said, neither Mrs. Trafford nor Julia herself was prepared to find Stephen Howard awaiting them on the gravelled platform of the little country station.

"Oh! Mr. Howard," exclaimed Julia, as she caught sight of him.

"Are you come to meet us?" cried Mrs. Trafford as she gave him her hand to alight.

"Why, of course," he answered. "We were all doing nothing—some of us thinking about tennis

and others not thinking about anything at all. I found my way out to the stables to find something there to think about, and I happened to see the break coming off for you—so I came with it."

"That was very nice of you," said Julia sweetly.

How Julia was altered! By the time they drove in at the big gates at Matcham, with the family device hewn in stone on either side, an imp rampant carrying a pitchfork, she was looking quite pretty, and when Lady Lucifer came out into the beautiful old oak hall to welcome them, she found herself saying in her own heart that really Stephen Howard (whom, up to that day, she had firmly believed was taking leave of his senses) knew very well what he was about, and that little Miss Trafford was growing quite pretty.

The Lucifers were among the few people possessing a large and lovely hall who did not regularly use it as a sitting-room. It had been so used in the time of the lord's mother, but the present mistress of the house said it was a detestable custom and used a suite of rooms instead—a morning-room out of which was her boudoir and out of which again was the library.

"Come into the library," she said hospitably—"You cannot be dusty with such a short journey. Tea is in full swing and Mr. Carrington has promised us a banjo performance presently."

So Mrs. Trafford went with Lady Lucifer into the pleasantly warm and well-lighted library, and Julia followed less quickly with Stephen Howard,

who had not met her for three days and was quite overjoyed to see her again. Nearly all the guests were there, and they seemed quite a crowd of people. Mrs. Markham smiled and made room for Mrs. Trafford beside her.

"Come and sit by me, Mrs. Trafford, do," she said. "You are just in time to hear this wonderful banjo. Mr. Carrington is really quite a genius at it. I tell him he ought to go about the streets and sing all the time. He would make quite a fortune."

She was a very gay little woman, and came out as Mrs. Trafford had not thought it possible for her to do. Of course it was gaiety of a very gentle order, for Mrs. Bob, as everyone in the house seemed to call her, was the least noisy person possible.

"You know there are to be great doings here this week," she said to Mrs. Trafford—"a lot of people to dinner to-night—a big lunch at Sir Simon D'Angler's to-morrow. A ball here in the evening. A ball at Plackington the next night and so on all the week. *I* feel like a school-girl just coming out."

"And you will look like it," said Mrs. Trafford, smiling.

"Well, I hope so," said Mrs. Bob, simply—"I have got some of the loveliest dresses you ever saw, and I've been hard at work all the morning cleaning my diamonds."

"Ah! you like to do them yourself," said Mrs. Trafford.

"Oh no, I don't," rejoined Mrs. Bob quickly, "but I am here without a maid. I have the best maid in all the world, but yesterday morning she had a telegram to say that her mother was dying and she must go at once if she wanted to see her alive again, so, of course, she had to fly off and leave me to get on as best I could. And the very last thing she said was—'Oh, Ma'am, if I'd only taken your diamonds in to be cleaned at a jeweller's instead of doing them myself.' But," Mrs. Bob added—"when you are strange to a place you don't care to trust your diamonds to anybody but yourself do you?"

Mrs. Trafford laughed merrily—"I don't know I am sure. I haven't got any diamonds except one or two little ornaments that would be quite safe with anybody."

"Well, I have some rather nice diamonds," said Mrs. Bob modestly—and added with a meaning look, "You see I haven't any daughters, Mrs. Trafford."

"And you would like children?" Mrs. Trafford asked.

The other caught her breath in a sharp sigh that was almost a sob. "Oh! if you knew how I long to have a dear little child of my own—of my very own. I had one once," she went on sadly—"but she only lived a fortnight—I had no joy of her. And how gladly I would give my diamonds, my everything except Bob, to have a little child to live, I could not tell you. It is a great want in one's life to be childless."

"Perhaps by and by——" Mrs. Trafford began.

"I fear not—it is more than eight years since my little babe was taken. Ah well, I try to believe it is for the best—I try to believe it."

Mrs. Trafford's kindly heart ached for the poor soul who had lost her one little child and had found that diamonds did not help to fill the void which the babe of a fortnight old had left behind it. She was so sorry for her—and the conversation of ten minutes had made her understand what had seemed before to be so strange, had explained away the sadness in the fair face, and the shadow which seemed always to settle down upon her eyes when the smiles had died away.

Yet ten minutes later Mrs. Bob was laughing heartily at Mr. Carrington's song and you might have thought that she had not a trouble in the world.

However, when the song was finished, she got up from her chair. "I am going off—well, not exactly to dress, but to see after my things and have a quiet time. By-the-bye, I am next door to you, so I can show you your room if you want to go."

"I will, thanks," Mrs. Trafford replied.

As they went to the door, Mrs. Bob stopped beside Lady Lucifer's chair—"I am going to show Mrs. Trafford the way, Violet," she said.

"Oh!—you are next to each other. Do, dear," said Lady Lucifer. "Stay, I will come up with you myself."

"No, don't," cried Mrs. Bob.

"Oh! Mrs. Markham will show me——" began Mrs. Trafford.

"My dear, I am coming," Lady Lucifer answered —"I want to see what gorgeous 'confection' you are going to dazzle us with to-night."

"Nothing very gorgeous," Mrs. Bob answered with a laugh. "Only a plain white gown."

"Is that so? Now, Mrs. Trafford, this is your room and your daughter's is out of it. And you will ring for anything you want, won't you? One of my women will come to see if you want any help."

"Oh! we shall not need much help, thanks," Mrs. Trafford replied. "You see we are used to doing without a maid."

"Well, as you feel inclined," Lady Lucifer said. "I hope you will be comfortable. We think the rooms on this side the pleasantest in the house. Well, I want to see this 'confection.' Will you come, Mrs. Trafford?"

Mrs. Trafford, of course, said that she would and the three ladies went off like three school-girls into Mrs. Bob's apartment.

The "confection" lay on the couch, and as Mrs. Bob had truly said it was a plain white gown, and as Lady Lucifer said "*What* a plain white gown." It was of satin of that peculiarly rich and sheeny beauty which bears being made up with little or no trimming. There were some exquisite crystal arrangements on the bodice and set round the apologies for sleeves and the whole was as both her

ladyship and Mrs. Trafford said in the same breath —"lovely."

"What are you going to wear with it, Maimie?" Lady Lucifer asked.

"Just a few ornaments," answered Mrs. Bob.

"Yes, but what kind of ornaments? I want to see your ornaments," Lady Lucifer cried—then turned to Mrs. Trafford—"would you believe it? This little woman has been here three days and I have never been in her bedroom yet. I have never had time to come for a chat at night even, and we always used to do that, didn't we, Maimie?"

"In Queensland," said Mrs. Bob.

Lady Lucifer gave a sigh. "Ah! yes, one has time to live in Queensland—here, scarcely to breathe. However, now I have half an hour to spare and I want to know whether your diamonds are better than mine or not. Well, of course, they are better in one way whether they are worth more or not, for yours are your own, while most of mine are family jewels."

Thus urged Mrs. Bob went to a leather-covered box of very ordinary appearance and began to unfasten the straps—then the corner fell off and disclosed a stout basket—she lifted the lid of that and took out an iron-bound box which fitted within the basket—"It's an unconventional affair," said Mrs. Bob, as she felt in her pocket for the key—"but we flatter ourselves it does not look like a jewel-box."

"It does not," said her hostess.

Then she turned the entire contents out for the benefit of the two ladies—and what a collection it was. The ornaments were almost entirely of diamonds but there was one exception an enormous butterfly formed of a large pigeon's blood ruby, with a single pearl for the head, emerald eyes and wide spreading diamond wings. Lady Lucifer picked it out from among the glittering collection—"My dear, wear that to-night—it will look lovely with that dead white gown."

"Yes, I will wear it," said Mrs. Bob.

"I never saw anything so lovely in my life," exclaimed Mrs. Trafford—"there are so many, and they are all so large and beautiful. If they were mine I should never be able to sleep for wondering if they were safe."

"Oh yes, you would soon get used to that," Mrs. Bob replied. "I used to feel a little nervous in India and on board ship, but I kept the shabby old basket in sight and everybody thought it was bonnets—I always called it my bonnet-box," she ended smiling.

"My dear," said Lady Lucifer—"I yield you the palm. Mine cannot come anywhere near them. I always said you were the luckiest girl I ever knew, always."

Mrs. Bob smiled and began putting the cases back into the box, laying aside on the table such ornaments as she wished to wear that evening. Then she packed up the basket again and threw a shawl carelessly over it. "There," she said, "it is quite

safe. Nobody would ever dream there was anything valuable in that."

All this did not leave Mrs. Trafford too much time in which to get ready for dinner. She went back to her room where she found Julia already nearly dressed.

"Why, Mother!" said she, "where have you been?"

"I have been in Mrs. Markham's bedroom, my dear, looking at her jewels—I have seen jewels before," she added, "but never anything like hers."

Julia was too happy, however, to be much impressed by anybody's jewels, no matter how costly or beautiful.

"Are they good?" she said carelessly.

"Exquisite," said Mrs. Trafford with decision.

However, when Julia half an hour later saw Mrs. Bob walk into the drawing-room, with her dead white satin dress, the big butterfly playing on her left shoulder, and three large stars adorning the bodice beneath it, which in their turn caught up and held in place a lovely necklace of large single stones, she felt indifferent no longer, but looked at her with undisguised admiration and caught herself wondering whether she would ever be able to adorn herself in like fashion.

I wonder is there any woman in all the world who does not really like diamonds? I once knew a man who said he detested them, and I have heard that same man tell a lady that her diamonds were exquisite. Julia that evening, turned to Stephen

Howard and said, "How delightful your sister looks."

"Yes, she does look rather nice," he answered in true brotherly fashion—"that is a nice frock she's got on."

"And her diamonds are lovely," said Julia.

"Do you like diamonds?" he enquired.

"I love them," she said promptly, at which he laughed and said how odd it was, ladies were all the same on that subject.

"Yes, I believe we are," said she laughing too.

It was a large dinner, of more than forty people indeed—and Julia went in with Stephen and enjoyed herself oh! so much. Of course the evening seemed to go like magic and it was quite with surprise that she realised that the guests were quickly saying good night. As the last one disappeared Mrs. Bob moved to where Lady Lucifer was standing. "I'm so tired to-night, Violet," she said, "I am going to bed. Good night."

"Good night, dear," said Lady Lucifer. "But cannot I do anything? Will you have anything sent up to your room?"

Mrs. Bob fairly laughed. "Not a thing, dear—I am tired, that is all," she replied. "I will just steal off before you have those wonderful card-tricks."

So away she went and then Mr. Carrington, who was a young man highly popular in Society, a sort of Jack-of-all-amusements, began to show off his skill at various card-tricks—yet scarcely had he began when the door was hurriedly opened and Mrs.

Bob came running in with a scared white face, scarcely indeed less white than her satin gown. "Oh! Bob—Violet," she gasped.

Her hostess and her husband both jumped up. "What is it?" asked one. "Are you ill?" said the other.

"My box, my jewels," she cried. "They are gone, all gone, stolen!"

"Good Heavens!" cried Markham, then dashed up the stairs followed by all the panic stricken company.

"Oh! Maimie, what shall we do?" cried Lady Lucifer in great distress.

Mrs. Bob began to laugh in a very suspicious way as if very little was needed to send her into hysterics. "I—I—" she began—then pointed to the place where the box had stood and to the open window.

It was not more than two or three inches open, but already it was too late in the year for bedroom windows, or indeed for the matter of that any windows, to stand open without some special reason —there was, however, a very special reason for this window standing open, and with an exclamation Bob Markham dashed across the room and flung it to the top, thrusting his head out as if it was likely that the thief or thieves would be crouching in the laurels below.

"They have actually left the ladder against the wall," he said to Lord Lucifer who had followed him.

"What is to be done?" Lord Lucifer answered with a question. "Here Thomas, run down and turn some of the men out. Let us have the police such as they are at once. And let Joe saddle Bonny Bess and drive off to the station at Blankhampton at once and tell the police there. Let him drive like steam."

"It won't be any good," said Bob Markham shaking his head. "I've noticed that jewel robberies in England are never found out. Maimie, my dear, you will have your shine a bit diminished for the dance to-morrow, and I doubt if I shall ever be able to find such jewels again for you."

"My dear Markham, I am so sorry," Lucifer began, when Bob stopped him.

"No, don't say any more about it. It might have happened in anybody's house before or after, as easily in our own as in any other. And who knows —we may get them back in no time. Anyway, you must not blame yourselves in any way whatever, and by-the-bye, hadn't you better look after your wife's jewels?"

Thus his attention turned to danger at home, Lord Lucifer went off to his wife's room followed by all the crowd of guests and servants, but Lady Lucifer's jewels were untouched, evidently nobody had been in that part of the house. "Poor little thing, it is only you who have suffered," cried Lady Lucifer tenderly.

Mrs. Bob tried to laugh but only succeeded in looking very chokey—then she put up her hand and

touched the lovely butterfly upon her shoulder. "I have my butterfly left, Violet," she said, the tears springing into her eyes, "and but for you I should not have dreamt of putting more than a little ornament or two on to-night. You have saved me these anyway."

"I am glad," cried Lady Lucifer. "Why, these must be almost the most valuable of all your jewels."

"Oh! no—there was a collet necklace worth as much as all these put together," Mrs. Bob replied—then exclaimed—"Why, Bob—what is it?"

"Somebody has been in here," he said, from the window where he was standing. "See here is a footmark on the white paint—there a scratch and the window is half an inch open."

"Then they were disturbed," Lady Lucifer cried.

"I don't know—they left the ladder at my wife's window. I should say they came here first. Have you looked *inside* your cases, Lady Lucifer?"

"No!"

It was but the work of a moment to fly at the jewel-box and tear open the leather jewel-cases within—and only the work of another moment to realize that they were all empty. Lady Lucifer gave a shrill scream.

"They have taken them all—all—all—and I shall never get any more. Oh! what shall I do?"

In an instant the house was in ten times the uproar than had been caused by the loss of Mrs. Bob's jewels. It is so easy to be calm and collected

and tender over the troubles of other folk, but now it became Mrs. Bob's office to soothe and pet her hostess, who was screaming and crying, threatening every moment to go into violent hysterics.

Still, for the present at least, all the screaming and crying in the world would not give any clue to the missing jewels, rather retarded operations as a matter of fact, for Lord Lucifer had to attend to his wife, or to be particular, to stand looking on helplessly while others did so, when he might have been thinking of something which would help the police when they reached Matcham.

Somehow not a soul in the house seemed to think of going to bed that night until the arrival of the police. As soon as Lady Lucifer was collected enough to do so, they all went downstairs into the hall, and there they sat in a circle about the newly piled up fire, listening for the first sound of wheels along the avenue.

"This is simply dreadful," exclaimed the master of Matcham, after about a quarter of an hour of doleful looks and dismal stories—"if we have had a thumping loss, Markham, we may as well try to support ourselves under it. Wilson, bring out some champagne—the '84."

"Yes, my Lord," said Wilson.

After this they all seemed to gather up heart a little, and the entire company drank a bumper to the safe return of the jewels.

"Don't feel so bad about it now, do you, Vi?" said Lucifer to his wife.

"Yes—I feel pretty bad," she answered.

"*I* feel dreadful," put in Mrs. Bob, "but I never can go into a rage and I can't cry—I can only choke a little; so I never get the credit of being really in trouble about anything."

"Never mind, little woman," said her husband kindly. "We will try and scrape a few more trinkets together for you somehow or other."

"We'll both do our best," chimed in Lucifer looking at his wife.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN STATU QUO.

"The eclipsing of another's sun will not make ours shine the brighter."—ANON.

"Thoughts deeper than all speech,
Feeling deeper than all thought."
—CRANCH.

BOB MARKHAM was not very far out of it when he had said that in England jewel robberies are never found out, for it seemed as if there could be no unravelling of the mystery by which Matcham was surrounded and possessed.

In due time the police came, and as well as they could investigated the scene of the burglary. They were shown the place where the old leather-covered basket had stood in Mrs. Markham's bed-room, were given an accurate account of its contents and description of the valuable ornaments which it had

contained. Then they examined the window and by the dim morning light went outside and examined the ground below, found the ladder still standing against the wall and a square of bass—ordinary common gardener's bass which had been used to put on the slightly damp ground behind the laurel-bushes, so that no impression might be left of tell-tale footmarks. The thieves had not, as generally happens, left behind them a jemmy with its owner's initials engraved thereon or a hat or any other clue which might lead to identification, no, the thief or thieves had accomplished the work quickly and deftly, and neatly too.

Lady Lucifer's room gave even fewer evidences of what had happened—the window had been found about an inch open, the sill was slightly marked and scratched, and the jewels were gone.

And there for the present they seemed inclined to stick. Lord Lucifer offered a reward of five thousand pounds for the recovery of his wife's jewels and Mr. Markham offered twice the sum for the restoration of his wife's. Then, after a few hours, the box, basket, and leather cover which had contained the latter were found in a thick shrubbery not more than a couple of hundred yards from the mansion itself and even all the cases were found within it.

The box was examined and taken back to the house and Mrs. Bob was summoned. "Why," she said—"they have left every case—yes, every one. What nice thieves! This one," she added, taking

out a lttle case from among its fellows, "contained the locket which had my dear little child's hair in it. Why—" and then she tore it open with eager hands. "Oh!—oh! they have left it to me—they have left it to me. Oh! how kind of them—how good of them! I don't care now if we never get the others back again." And then she began to kiss the locket passionately, until the tears stood in more than one of the eyes which were looking on.

Lady Lucifer with marvellous rapidity got used to the idea of her loss and even discussed what she should do for suitable jewelry supposing that her own should not be traced.

"I must have jewelry, you know," she said down the length of the breakfast-table to her husband on the second morning after the robbery—"if it is only to wear at Court."

"Well," said he—"if you get your own back again, you needn't trouble about any more and if you don't get your own, you must spin the five thousand I have offered for the reward as far as you can to provide yourself with new."

But the days went by and there was no trace of the jewels. The various entertainments of the week came off in due course and Lady Lucifer made the best show she could with the jewels that she had worn at dinner on that eventful night, while Mrs. Bob with her stars and her gorgeous butterfly, and her beautiful single-stone necklace, did not give the idea of having lost a single thing.

She was a sweet soul, for on the evening after

the robbery when everybody was dressing for dinner, which was to be followed by a ball, she left her room and went to her hostess's door at which she knocked.

"Can I speak to Lady Lucifer, Mawson," she said when the maid opened it.

"I think so, ma'am," Mawson answered.

"Yes, yes, come in," cried her ladyship, who was just fastening the lace of her bodice with two of her husband's diamond breast-pins.

"Violet," said Mrs. Bob, "you won't be offended with me? I've brought you this to smarten you up a little," and she held out the single stone necklace that I have mentioned before.

"Oh! my dear, I couldn't," Lady Lucifer cried. "I really couldn't. Put it on yourself, Maimie, dear, and bless you for the sweet thought."

"But I never wear a necklace round my throat," Mrs. Bob urged. "And you always do, so I know you won't feel properly dressed unless you feel you have one on. And nobody will know—it is exactly like the one you lost, you know.

"Well, it is sweet of you," exclaimed Lady Lucifer waveringly.

"Do, dear," Mrs. Bob went on in her most persuasive accents, and then as Lady Lucifer still looked doubtful, she put her arms up and clasped the pretty glittering bauble around her friend's fair throat. "Now you look like yourself," she said fondly. "And I am smart enough with these," touching the ornaments in her own breast. When

she had gone away, Lady Lucifer opened the door into her husband's dressing-room and went in.

"Lucifer," she said to her husband—"Maimie insists as she got rather better treated than I did, that I shall share her luck by wearing this to-night. It is exactly like my own, you know. I hope you don't mind?"

"Not a bit," he answered—"that is to say I don't mind your wearing her necklace. I should if it belonged to anybody else."

"That is all right," she said much relieved, for Lady Lucifer was a good wife and would not have done anything to vex her husband for the world. "Isn't it sweet of her?"

"Yes, she's a nice little woman," returned Lucifer, who liked Mrs. Bob well enough, but was not enthusiastic about her or any other woman beside his wife.

It must be owned that the great robbery did a great deal for our friend Mrs. Trafford. You see having lost nothing herself, having indeed nothing of that kind to lose, she was left in possession of a very calm clear mind. Never was any woman in all the world so tenderly sympathetic as was she to the two ladies who had been bereft of nearly all their aids to beauty. Some women in her place could not have helped feeling some little satisfaction in the misfortune of their better endowed friends (which is a crib from Rochefoucauld, who has put it in infinitely better words), but Mrs. Trafford had no such feeling in her heart. She was really and

genuinely sorry and she expressed as much many times in the course of the day both to Mrs. Bob and to her hostess.

"I can't tell you how sympathetic Mrs. Trafford has been," Lady Lucifer said to her husband while she still lingered in his dressing-room. "Most women would be uncommonly glad when another woman had lost all her diamonds, but she is just as sorry and feeling about it as if she had lost them herself."

"Yes—very nice woman," said Lucifer, struggling with his tie.

"Those Mauleverers may turn up their stupid noses at her as much as ever they like," her ladyship went on, "as much as ever they like. It's so silly, they alway pretend they won't know her on any account. Such nonsense; why she's just as good as they are, or if not quite so well-born, a great deal pleasanter to know. At all events Colonel Urquhart didn't want to marry one of them, or Colonel anybody else either."

At this point Lord Lucifer ruined his fourth tie. "Damn the thing," he burst out—then looked at his wife. "Really, Violet darling, I beg your pardon, but it is awfully aggravating. I've no time to lose and my fingers seem all thumbs to-night. 'Pon my word," he ended, "I shall give up wearing these ties altogether. I shall take to those things that hitch on behind."

"I should if I were you," said her ladyship calmly, "they would be less trouble and you could

get them tied a great deal better for you, instead of wasting half a dozen ties for one evening you would hitch one on as you call it and you would look better turned out altogether."

Lord Lucifer nearly exploded; why the idea was preposterous and he had only suggested it in the exasperation of the moment, expecting as a matter of course that his wife would at once utterly repudiate the bare idea of his ever degrading himself by wearing a tie that was ready made and would hitch on behind, repudiate it with indignation and scorn. In his disgust at her reply, he took up a fresh tie and adjusted it into as neat and exquisite a bow as was ever turned out by the fingers of man, and when he saw the result, his wrath died out and he was his own good-humoured self once again.

"Ah! well, well, I think I need not take to made-up things while I can tie a bow like that," he said surveying his handiwork proudly. "But Vi, hadn't you better be going? It's getting awfully late."

"Yes, but I am quite ready," she answered.

She had been getting into her gloves as she talked and now began to button the second one. "I shall introduce the Mauleverers to her to-night," she said going on with their original conversation.

"Oh! are they coming?"

"Why yes. One couldn't leave them out, you know and of course skittish young things like

they are would not miss a chance of a dance. Is it likely ? "

" Mrs. Trafford won't thank you."

" No, perhaps not—but she will bear it to oblige me, I know."

Thus charitably determined Lady Lucifer went down to dinner, nor did she when her opportunity came, show that she had forgotten her intentions. For when she found herself near to the Mauleverers and by a happy chance to Mrs. Trafford, she said suddenly—" Oh ! by the bye, Miss Mauleverer, I want to introduce you to Mrs. Trafford. You are neighbours and ought to know one another."

Miss Mauleverer thus cornered, had no choice but to give Mrs. Trafford her stiffest bow (and oh ! it was stiff—a poker wasn't in it with that act of courtesy) and speak a word to her.

Mrs. Trafford secure in her position as the mother-in-law of her dear children's husbands and in the fact that Julia was at that very moment gliding by them in Stephen Howard's arms, was not very cordial, not indeed more than barely civil, and when Lady Lucifer perceived as much she was so overflowing with joy that she could have taken the little widow right into her arms and hugged her.

Miss Mauleverer had not expected this move, she had expected her to be more gushing, more overwhelmed with *the honour* thus put upon her. In truth she was so taken aback by the quiet dignity of Mrs. Trafford's demeanour that she caught herself saying something about the badness of the roads

between Matcham and Blankhampton. Now this was Mrs. Trafford's chance, nor did she lose it.

"Really," she said sweetly, "are the roads very bad?"

"Oh! very bad," answered the spinster in a superior tone. "Then I suppose you came by train —it *is* a long drive from Blankhampton."

"No—we are staying in the house," returned Mrs. Trafford very quietly.

After this the spinster judiciously melted away, and Mrs. Trafford was left in undoubted possession of the field. Lady Lucifer who had been at hand all the time though she had apparently been talking to other people, had not missed a word, and as Mrs. Trafford moved away after an instant's pause in quite a different direction to Miss Maul-everer, she caught her hand for a moment as she passed. Mrs. Trafford turned and smiled at her in return but spoke not a word. Indeed there was no need of words for without them each understood the other perfectly—it was a harmony without words.

And during all this time Julia was in Elysium! She had a fresh white gown on, and carried a beautiful posy of white flowers tied with long white ribbon streamers, which had been sent up to her room with Mr. Stephen Howard's compliments. She had his initials S. H. set down on her programme against more dances than I think it would be quite honourable of me to mention, and she had heard some one say as she passed—"Who is the charming

girl with the tall fair man ?" so what more could be wanted to fill the cup of her happiness until it overflowed ? Well, to be strictly accurate—only one thing, and that she knew now would come sooner or later, probably before many days had gone by.

CHAPTER IX.

ON THE BRINK,

"To know
That which before us lies in daily life
Is the prime wisdom."—MILTON.

IT would take more space than I have to give were I fully to describe that week at Matcham, the ball at Plackington, the big dinner at Lord Mallinbro's, the bazaar which Lady Lucifer opened, the little friendly dance the next evening at Matcham to which only the very nicest people were asked and for which no formal invitations were sent out. I think perhaps that most of them enjoyed that evening more than all the rest of the week, the floor was in perfect condition, there was plenty of room, the supper was charming and the wine the best that was in the cellar. Julia did not dance much, only three waltzes with Stephen Howard, who waltzed divinely—(Julia's adjective, not mine)—but she sat out a good deal and Stephen sat with her, and really it was all one to them whether they were dancing or resting.

But still he did not take the plunge and propose

and on the 28th Julia and her mother went back to St. Eve's much as they had come, that is to say with no settled and definite change looming in the near future for either of them.

Nevertheless Mrs. Trafford was perfectly satisfied and Julia was amazingly happy and the admirable Cox perceived that all had gone well with them.

They found lying on the hall table the letters which that morning's post had brought to the house, a couple of invitations, a bill, several circulars and a long letter from Lady Staunton.

"Oh! here is a letter from Laurie," said Mrs. Trafford, and going upstairs into the drawing-room she sat down by the fire and began to read it, commenting upon it at intervals.

"Oh! they are to have their leave from the 1st of November," she said first.

"I expected that," said Julia unfastening her coat.

"And Laurie wants to know if we want them here during their leave—*if* we want them here," Mrs. Trafford repeated, at which Julia laughed aloud.

"Oh!—or will we go and meet them in Town—? Oh! that is quite impossible, dear. I really should not care to leave home just now."

Julia blushed right rosy red. "Well, I think it would be rather a pity," she returned.

"Oh! quite out of the question," Mrs. Trafford said with decision—then took up the letter again and went on reading.

"Laurie says they will either come to us to meet us in Town or come to us later, but the old ladies have made a special point of asking them for Christmas, and are going to ask us too—Oh!" and there she stopped short again and looked with doubtful eyes at her daughter.

"There is time enough to settle all that," said Julia. "I should tell Laurie to suit her own convenience about coming here any time between this and their visit to the old ladies. It is far the best to leave it to them and then they will fit things to suit themselves."

"You are right, dear," said Mrs. Trafford—"then when I have had a cup of tea I will write to Laurie at once."

So she did. She had already found time to write a graphic description of the jewel-robbery whilst at Matcham, and to-day she spoke of it again. "I do not believe," she said, "that either dear Lady Lucifer or that sweet little Mrs. Bob—as *every*body calls her—will ever see one of all those beautiful jewels again and, my dear, I assure you when I think of the heaps of exquisite diamonds that Mrs. Bob showed us not four hours before the robbery took place, my heart positively aches for her. Lady Lucifer's jewels you have seen for yourself. She has nothing left now but three or four little brooches which are paltry compared with what she has lost.

"About our coming to Town—my dear child, it is out of the question altogether. In fact it is im-

perative that we remain at home for the present. I am sure that you and Anthony will enjoy yourselves very much better by yourselves, and you know that you will both be heartily welcome here at any time and for any time that suits you best during your leave. About the visit you mention to Anthony's aunts—you go, of course, dear, but *at present* Julia and I would rather not say anything. I rather fancy Julia will have other plans by that time. Mr. Stephen Howard still continues to pay her the closest attention, in fact, at Matcham they were together morning, noon, and night. He sent her the most exquisite bouquets for the three dances we were at and corsage flowers for each other night. So you understand, dear, for the present I would rather not commit myself one way or the other.

"By-the-bye, you say neither Julia nor I have told you what Mr. Howard is like! He is very tall and strong-looking, *very* fair and handsome. Has lovely blue eyes, and is one of the nicest young men I have ever known in my life. In worldly respects he is everything that can be desired and Julia seems to like him very much, though she has not actually said so."

This letter Mrs. Trafford closed and sent off to her youngest daughter, without showing it to Julia.

Julia, however, did not notice the omission and when Mrs. Trafford went back to the drawing-room, she found her sitting comfortably by the fire toasting her feet on the fender. She put down the

book which she was reading and looked at her mother.

"Did you notice that Mrs. Lovelace was not at the ball at Matcham, nor yet the one at Plackington?" she asked.

"Yes. But I heard some one ask Miss Mauleverer where she was and why she was not there and she said that she had gone up to Town for a few days."

"Ah! I see," said Julia. "Well, it was better that she wasn't there for Captain Legard went on awfully with Pamela Winstanley and Mrs. Lovelace would have been furious the whole time."

"Captain Legard seems to be devoting himself to Pamela," Mrs. Trafford remarked.

"Oh! utterly."

"Though she is hardly the girl I should have thought would attract him. However, you never can tell how these affairs come about. But she is so—so old-fashioned looking although she is certainly pretty; and he is so—well, so——"

"He puts on tremendous side," said Julia quickly.

"Yes—though I scarcely quite meant that. But he is so very dragoonish—a lady killer sort of a man, always with his head poking forward and his eyes roving about as if he was looking for fresh worlds to conquer. And for him to be apparently going in seriously for Pamela Winstanley, who is already a little old-maidish in spite of her slang, is very odd, to say the least of it."

"Yes," answered Julia dreamily—"these things are generally very odd. I think life altogether is odd."

Well, the next day quite a small crowd of people turned up at the pretty house in St. Eve's and Mrs. Trafford perceived that she had not suffered in social importance by having made one of the house-party at Matcham.

Among her visitors was Mr. Evelyn Gabrielli, who was looking very ill. He had three days previously received a favour (anonymously), consisting of various articles of toilette utility together with divers remarks concerning his personal vanity such as had made him unutterably wretched.

This production he had traced to two ladies, sisters, who were on the outside fringe of the Parish set and were very objectionable people all round. Indeed to be quite accurate I cannot truthfully say that they were in a set of any kind. I never saw anybody speaking to them or walking with them. But they went duly and truly to the Parish services, where they were in the world but not of the world. And if you think that an odd thing to say of two ladies in such circumstances, I must tell you that the Parish set comprised "the world" of the ancient city.

Mrs. Trafford noticed in a moment that something was wrong with him. He was not wearing a single ring on his lady-like hands—incredible as it may seem to those who know him—and his face had a sweet and anxious look as if his

self-inflicted scourgings had proved too severe for him.

Mrs. Trafford was very kind and tender with him, she made him sit in the cosy chair by the fire and was sure he was far from well. Was it the relaxing air of Blankhampton? Without doubt it was relaxing, the little woman told him.

Now Mr. Gabrielli could scarcely tell the sympathetic little widow that two vulgar woman had troubled themselves to send him a small quantity of rouge and a piece of cotton-wool without giving him the opportunity of thanking them for the attention, so he had to dissemble somewhat, to say that he was not feeling very well, that he had been a little worried about parish affairs for some days, and should be really glad to have a few day's change.

Mrs. Trafford little thought how truly he spoke when he said that *parish* affairs had worried him. She naturally thought of services, rehearsals—no—no—what am I talking about, I mean practices, choir-school and so forth. If only she had known about that rouge and the cotton-wool! She had always had a lurking suspicion that the Reverend Evelyn had liked her younger flower better than they had any of them thought at the time of Laura's marriage and she set down his pale face and distressed looks partly to that cause. If she had but known that the horrid woman who held the stall just below her own, was at the bottom of it all, well, I think Mrs. Trafford would have felt inclined to lay

the whole story before the Dean and to use all her influence to get pressure put upon her to resign her holding.

Then very soon Pamela Winstanley came in with her nose in the air and all her family pride freshly starched. And Pamela brought news.

"The regiment has got orders to be off at once," she said and both Mrs. Trafford and Julia noticed that she spoke in a possessive way as if the regiment *in toto* belonged to her.

"Going," echoed Mrs. Trafford. "My dear Pamela, you surely don't mean the 32nd—the Dragoons."

"Yes, the 32nd," answered Pamela—"Yes, they are off to Ireland in a fortnight from now."

"But why?" Mrs. Trafford cried. "They have been here such a short time and they expected to be here until spring twelve-month."

"I don't know why," replied Pamela—"I only know that they have got their route and are going."

I do not know at this moment if I have told you that Pamela Winstanley and Julia were by way of being great friends, but nevertheless I must confess that Julia almost laughed aloud at Pamela's army language, and at her pronunciation of the term "route" which she did in the most approved army fashion as if it was spelt with a W instead of a U.

"Who told you?" she asked.

"I heard it from Captain Legard this morning," answered Pamela, quite as if Captain Legard belonged to her.

The two ladies heard and wondered, wondered if she and Captain Legard had come to an understanding during the week of their absence?

"What will Mrs. Lovelace say to their move?" said Julia, thinking that perhaps Pamela would be betrayed into imparting any further information that she might possess.

Pamela stiffened herself until she began to look like a Mauleverer—"Oh! I don't think it matters one way or the other what Mrs. Lovelace says," she returned sharply.

Julia laughed—"It is not so long since she had a good deal of say in Captain Legard's affairs, Pamela," she said quietly.

"Not since *I* came," rejoined Pamela instantly.

She had scarcely uttered the words when the admirable Cox showed Captain Legard into the room.

"You have heard our news?" he said as he greeted Mrs. Trafford.

"Yes. Miss Winstanley has just told us," Mrs. Trafford answered.

He turned quickly round. "Ah! how d'you do, Miss Winstanley?" he said holding out his hand. "How did you hear it?"

There was a moment's silence—Miss Winstanley looked at him for that space of time with her eyes widely opened and her lips drawn apart. Then an angry flush swept across her fair face—"Why, I heard it from you," she answered.

For another moment there was silence again—

then he laughed rather awkwardly. "Oh! to be sure, yes. I had forgotten that I had sent my man down to you with those books this morning," he said with very well-assumed carelessness.

They had all been standing but Mrs. Trafford sat down again and picked up her knitting. She was still at work on a crimson sock, but it was not the same—it was indeed the second of another pair. The little widow found it convenient to do a good deal of knitting—in the first place it was work that interested and amused her, work to which she could give, as suited her at the moment, the closest or the most lax attention. It was not expensive and the socks when finished, always made acceptable presents to her dear boys, as she generally called the husbands of her children, Laura and Madge.

She gave the few inches of silken work the closest attention then, for she was not anxious that Pamela should see in her eyes the knowledge which she had just gained from Captain Legard's remarks, remarks which had told her all too plainly that he had not the very smallest intention of anything serious coming about between the young lady and himself. She was really sorry that Pamela should have found them alone and thus have had the opportunity of giving herself little airs about the 32nd and Captain Legard. It was natural and yet it was so silly. Mrs. Trafford saw or thought that she saw so very clearly just what had happened—that he had gone rather further with Mrs. Lovelace than he knew to be prudent, that like a cautious man anxious to

avoid any unpleasantness with her husband, he had deliberately instituted a quarrel with her and had started a violent flirtation with Pamela Winstanley instead. And Pamela had been taken in by it, she had given herself little airs and had spoken of the regiment and the route to Mrs. Trafford in a tone as if they belonged to her. Mrs. Trafford was very sorry for Pamela Winstanley.

Captain Legard, however, displayed an admirable self-possession which served to prevent any awkwardness. He sat down again as Mrs. Trafford did so, and went on talking as if Pamela had never blushed and he had not tried to make the lady of the house believe that he had not had communication with the young lady already that day.

"It is a great bore leaving," he said in disgusted accents, "really a great bore. But it is always so with us. We are sent to a place and get to like it and as soon as that happens and we know a few people in it, we are sent off again somewhere else to begin it all over again."

"Oh! it is very tiresome, of course," Mrs. Trafford agreed, "though," she added with a laugh, "I believe my two girls were glad to go. They both wanted to begin soldiering in downright good earnest and they felt that it was not proper soldiering till they went to a strange town where they didn't know a soul."

Captain Legard laughed. "They will soon get tired of that," he remarked. "Of course, it isn't so bad for us unmarried officers, but we find it bad

enough, and married men very soon come to find the constant changes intolerable. For my part," he added deliberately and looking steadily at Mrs. Trafford, "I never find myself in the midst of a move that I do not feel thankful that I have no wife to be made uncomfortable too."

Mrs. Trafford coughed—"Yes—yes," she said nervously, for really she was getting quite nervous thinking of poor Pamela's little airs and what this would mean to her—"I have no doubt it is a very tiresome existence when once the glamour has worn of. But it is time we were thinking of tea. Will you ring the bell, Captain Legard?"

To her great relief the door opened as she uttered the words and two ladies were shown in—Mrs. John Doughty and her daughter. Never perhaps had Mrs. Trafford been so thankful to see that particular lady in all her life before. She welcomed her with open arms and made her sit down beside her and assumed a confidential attitude which surprised while it gratified her visitor. Then the bells began to ring for evensong and Mr. Gabrielli went away, leaving Julia free to talk to Miss Florence Doughty, thus leaving Pamela and Captain Legard at liberty to explain the events of the past ten minutes if they chose to do so.

But Captain Legard's keen eye had spied out Florence Doughty, who, if not an actually pretty girl, was very young, very fresh, plump, with a lovely rose and lily complexion and a wholesome capacity for open and innocent flirtation such as you

only see in extreme youth. So instead of sitting down beside Pamela and soothing her wounded feelings, he strolled across to Julia and the youthful charmer and Julia had no choice but to introduce him.

Thus Julia could only go over to Pamela, who was sitting quite near to the place where Cox usually set the tea table. Then Cox came in with the tray and Julia thanked Heaven that she would have something to do. She hardly dared look at Pamela; but Pamela was proud if she was anything and after the first shock she pulled herself together most creditably.

"Not anything, thanks," she said, when Julia passed her the cake-plate—"I have only just time for a cup of tea. Yes, I must be off to service, dear. Father likes us to go you know."

In less than five minutes she had said good-bye and had gone, Legard opened the door for her and she passed him with a brave "Good-bye Captain Legard," but never looked at him. Then he shut the door and came back to his seat again, picking up the thread of his conversation with Florence Doughty as if it had never been interrupted.

They had scarcely settled down again when the door opened and Cox showed in another visitor, and to Julia's surprise it was Stephen Howard. "Oh! is it you?" she said in astonishment—"I thought you were going to London."

"I put off going," he answered—"I am going to-morrow, probably."

Mrs. Trafford greeted him with pleasant familiarity and put out her left hand. "Julia will give you some tea," she said kindly. "No, don't give him that—let Cox bring some fresh."

Then she went on talking to Mrs. John Doughty, who being the daughter of a bishop and the wife of a lawyer of what I have heard very graphically called "risen standing," always felt that it behoved her to be very particular indeed about her position in Blankhampton society. At that moment Mrs. Doughty was very busy laying down the law to Mrs. Trafford about some people who had not long before come to the town and who, as they had a fairly large income a very large family of rather good-looking sons and daughters with a preponderance of the feminine over the masculine gender to the extent of nine to three, were just at that time an object of considerable interest to the townspeople. In her heart Mrs. Doughty was of opinion that strangers and pilgrims ought not to be encouraged in Blankhampton. There were then, as there always had been, more marriageable young women in Blankhampton than Blankhampton knew how to provide for. Blankhampton, in fact, never had adequately provided for her virgins, else Mrs. Doughty would never have stooped from her dignity as the daughter of an archdeacon (who afterwards became a bishop) to share the name and home of young John Doughty, the plasterer's son. She could not, however, in Mrs. Trafford's own house, quite say as much as this to her, for Mrs. Trafford might possibly

have taken the hint as a personal one and have remembered it afterwards. But she did go as far as she safely could on that road, and said that she had heard these people were not very nice, that the girls were dreadfully loud in their dress, that the father was a morose and none too agreeable person who lived on his wife's money which had all come from her first husband; and she added that she did not think a woman could be really a nice woman who could persuade her husband to leave her everything he possessed without providing for his child, and then that she should go and marry again, have an enormous family and bring another man's children up on what practically belonged to the first husband's child.

Mrs. Doughty spoke of an enormous family as if the possession thereof was one of the seven cardinal sins and ought to be put down. Mrs. Trafford serene in the knowledge of her two children smiled as she bethought her of a verse in a great Book which says—"Blessed is the man who hath his quiver full of them."

However, Mrs. John Doughty had other fish to fry, that is other calls to make—I have said that the ladies of Blankhampton were great at that kind of social observances—and she very soon went away. Captain Legard went away at the same time—a mere coincidence, of course."

"My dear," said Mrs. Trafford to Julia when the door had closed behind them—"is there anything wrong with me to-day, or are the times out of

joint? Surely I could not be mistaken in thinking that everything went wrong with everybody else."

"Oh! you were not mistaken, dear," Julia answered. "It was really quite painful. I wished I had never been born or that I had neither eyes nor ears. I don't know that I was ever so uncomfortable in my life. In fact, we must all have looked like the people in Du Maurier's pictures in the 'Things one would rather have left unsaid' series."

"It was most unpleasant," said Mrs. Trafford busily gathering her knitting together and putting it into a pretty satin-lined and much trimmed basket. "I wonder now if you would mind my going away for a few minutes, Mr. Howard? I promised to write a rather important letter and I have only just time to do so before dinner."

Stephen Howard got up from his chair and said he would not detain Mrs. Trafford for the world. Would she rather that he did not stay—that he went away?

"By no means," Mrs. Trafford answered graciously. It was too kind of him not to mind her telling him quite as an old friend and without ceremony. She should not be very long.

Thus Mrs. Trafford went away and intimated to the admirable Cox that no more visitors were to be admitted. Then she went into the morning-room and scrawled a letter to a friend, of no importance whatever. After which she settled herself in a comfortable chair and buried herself in the pages of a

new magazine in which she was greatly interested. I have a great admiration for Mrs. Trafford. What she might have proved in the busier rush and keener competition of a London swim I cannot say —I think she would have done well and have proved herself, what she undeniably proved herself in Blankhampton, a thoroughly skilful tactician. I know that she put all the Mrs. Doughtys and Antrobuses and all the rest of the Blankhampton matrons to utter and complete shame—to use the language of the turf, she romped clean away from them.

CHAPTER X.

"WE WANT TO GET MARRIED."

"A woman has two smiles that an angel might envy—the smile that accepts the lover afore words are uttered, and the smile that lights on the first-born baby."—HALIBURTON.

LEFT to themselves in the drawing-room, Stephen Howard and Julia drew nearer to the fire.

"I was so surprised to see you," said Julia putting her foot on the fender and resting her arm on the edge of the low mantelshelf. "I did not expect to see you for a week at least. In fact, if you had not turned up again for a fortnight, I should not have been much surprised."

He drew a trifle nearer to her. "Do you know why I didn't go?" he asked.

"Why, how should I know?" she demanded.

"I'll tell you. I—I couldn't go until I had spoken to you," he burst out.

Julia grew coquettish—"Spoken to me, Mr. Howard," she said—"But about what?"

The assumption of coquetry gave him courage and he took hold of her hand. "Don't you know what about?" he asked. "Oh! my dear—my dear—my little love," he whispered, and then he caught her to him and they had come to understand one another, and Mrs. Trafford had secured another good match, had indeed wrested the prize from the Blankhampton matrons before they had even realized that there was a new prize in the field.

"And you're quite sure," murmured Julia after a little time, "that you really like me."

"Yes, I'm quite sure," said he, holding her yet more closely to him.

"And you don't think you will change your mind?"

"I am sure I shall never do that," he replied. "You are much more likely to want to change yours."

"I don't think so," Julia said gravely.

Then there was silence again for a moment

"What will your mother say?" he said presently.

"She will be delighted," answered Julia. "She likes you immensely."

"And your sister, Lady Staunton? I am a little afraid of Lady Staunton," he said looking at her doubtfully.

"Afraid of my sister," Julia echoed. "Why my sister is a darling! Afraid of Laurie—well, that is funny."

"But she is—is—a great lady and—and she might not think me good enough for you. She might think it most objectionable to have a savage for a brother-in-law," he urged.

"Yes, she might, but it is not very likely," Julia said with a laugh.

"You won't want to keep me waiting long?" he said, after another pause.

"No—but I must have time to get my things ready," she answered.

"No, don't," he said—"I will buy you any quantity of things, as you call them, after we are married."

"You will have to see what Mother has to say about that," she returned.

"Then let us go and find her and tell her at once and see what she says about it," he cried eagerly.

So Julia and he went down to find Mrs. Trafford and impart the news to her—"Kiss me before we go," he said fondly as they reached the door.

And Julia kissed him and he kissed Julia a great many times before he opened it.

"I think Mother went down into the morning-room," Julia said, as they descended the stairs—"Yes, she is in there, I believe."

Mrs. Trafford was in the morning-room—in fact, she was so deeply engrossed in the magazine that

she had fallen asleep by the comfortable fire and when Julia with a good deal of noise opened the door, she jumped to her feet and the magazine went to the ground with a crash, knocking against the fire-irons on its way. With great presence of mind, she pushed it out of sight with her foot and put up her hand to see if her hair and its trimming of dainty lace felt all right.

"Have you written your letter, dear?" asked Julia.

Mrs. Trafford was herself again in a moment. "Yes, I had just finished," she replied—"I was on the point of coming upstairs to you."

"And we have come down to look for you," said Julia with pretty shyness—"because — well, because——"

"Because we have something to tell you," chimed in Stephen Howard.

"Yes," said Mrs. Trafford waiting for one or other of them to go on, though she saw very plainly what was coming.

"Well, the fact is, Mrs. Trafford," said Stephen Howard bluntly — "the fact is, we want to get married."

"Yes, Mother darling," echoed Julia—"we want to get married."

I do not know how how it was, but at this point the ludicrous aspect of the situation presented itself to Mrs. Trafford and she immediately went off into gay fits of the wildest laughter. The lovers, for a moment, looked as if they were half inclined to be

offended, then they too began to laugh and the three laughed one against the other till the tears actually stood in Mrs. Trafford's eyes. She was the first to recover herself.

"Oh! my dears," she cried, drying her eyes with a cobwebby bit of cambric—"forgive me, I beg of you. It is cruel of me to laugh at you, for I am so glad, so glad at what you tell me. But indeed the way in which you announced it was too funny—'We want to get married'—Oh! it was too funny."

But after that she sobered down and talked over the situation with a grave and kind manner which comforted Stephen Howard greatly. "I wonder what your sister will say"—she said after a time.

"Oh! my sister knows—that is to say she knows that I intended to ask Julia if she would have me," he replied.

"And what does she say about it?"

"She is delighted. She will tell you so herself when she comes over, which is sure to be to-morrow," he said—then with an instant's hesitancy, added—"And I hope you won't keep me hanging about very long."

"My dear boy," said Mrs. Trafford—"I promise you that I will not. There is no nuisance in the world like an engaged couple always about the house. It is such a very short time since my other children were married, that I have a feeling remembrance of it. We had only just got the house settled and quiet again and now we have to go through it all——"

"Mrs. Trafford," he broke in—I assure you I will not unsettle anything—not anything. I think it's an awful shame when men expect to have whole households turned topsy-turvy and heaps of things bought just because they have managed to persuade a certain young lady to marry them. If you would let us walk quietly out one morning next week and get married without a word to anybody at all, I should be quite satisfied—I should indeed."

"But I should not," Mrs. Trafford returned, smiling at Julia's dismayed face. "My daughter must have a proper wedding and a proper trousseau. Her sister and cousin each had them and she must have them too. But at the same time, if you are both very anxious for it there is really no reason why you should wait more than six weeks, or even a month. But I really could not consent to have a marriage hurried on earlier than that, I really could not."

With this Stephen Howard was obliged to be content. He was desperately in earnest, this young man, and now that he had broken the ice had no notion of losing anything for the want of asking for it.

Mrs. Trafford proved herself the most complaisant of prospective mothers-in-law; indeed she was now so well used to this kind of thing that she felt herself on perfectly familiar ground.

"Well, my dears," she said—"I don't see that we can arrange anything more to-night. Mr. Howard, you will stay and share our dinner, won't you?"

"I will with pleasure, Mrs. Trafford," he answered—"on one condition—that you won't call me Mr. Howard any more."

"My dear Stephen, I will do as you wish," she said, in her own airy little way. "But do, my dears, go back to the drawing-room. I have a letter to write and one or two trifles to attend to."

They went out of the room but Julia ran back from the foot of the stairs. "Is your letter to Laurie?" she asked.

"Yes. I thought of writing to let her know—you don't mind, do you, dear?"

"Not a bit. But give her my love and tell her I am very happy," said Julia.

Mrs. Trafford threw her arms round her daughter and held her tenderly to her. "I am so happy too, darling," she said, "for he is handsome and charming and good too, Julia! I am sure he is good."

"Yes. I think he is good," Julia whispered.

Mrs. Trafford pulled out the bit of flimsy cambric again and wiped a few tears away when Julia and her lover had gone upstairs again. Of course, she was glad that this engagement had come about. For some time past she had felt herself getting on in life, though she was not fifty yet, and the thought of leaving one or other of her girls alone in the world had worried her not a little. Besides that she had always believed firmly that the married state was the happiest state, the most natural and the most desirable, and she felt sure that her girls would make good wives as they had made good

daughters. And yet, now that it had ... parting with the last of them it was an unc... wrench, even though this young man seem... far as she could tell, to be all that she had sa... him in speaking of him to Julia, handsome ... charming and good too.

However, she did not allow herself to look very long upon the darker side of the picture—Julia was happy and she had carried off another most desirable match from the other matrons of Blankhampton, and she therefore soon dried her tears and went down stairs to consult with the cook about sundry little additions to that evening's dinner.

At any other time she would have touched the bell and have let the cook come to her; but the occasion had made her feel the want of human intercourse and she became more genial in consequence. So she went down into the comfortable servant's hall, where a bright little fire was burning, and told Cook that Mr. Howard was going to stay to dinner and that they must have a little more added to it.

The servants, of course, knew very well what was going on up-stairs, though they did not as yet know that Miss Julia and the handsome young man who had been so much about the house of late had actually come to an understanding, Cook suggested that the thick soup and roast duck of which her ladies' dinner was to consist should be supplemented by a bit of fish and a little dish of cutlets and assured her mistress, to whom she was devoted that

plenty of time before eight o'clock to e it comfortably.

Mrs. Trafford left it to her and turned to go tairs again. But at the door she turned back "I must tell you what has happened," she said— for you have both been such good servants to me. Miss Julia and Mr. Howard are engaged."

It was very pleasant to hear their congratulations, to hear Cox descant on Mr. Howard's good looks and pleasant ways—"I am sure, Ma'am," said Cox half shyly—"that the young ladies have got three as handsome gentlemen as ever married into a family."

"And the gentlemen three as sweet young ladies as could be found anywhere," said Smith. "But if you'll pardon me speaking what I think, Ma'am, Miss Julia has always been *my* favourite."

"Yes, Smith, I know it," answered Mrs. Trafford, with a certain suspicious dewiness about her eyelids. "It will be a great loss to me, but if it is for her happiness I shall not mind—mind, why I am delighted about it."

"Yes, Ma'am," answered Smith. "You said just now, Ma'am, that we have been good servants to you. I hope we have, for you've been a good kind mistress to us, and it's missises that have most to do with the making of servants. I've been in service a good many years now, Mum, and I know by this time what missises and servants and young ladies are. And our young ladies, they *are* ladies."

Well, the result of this bit of confidence was that

when the two ladies and Stephen How down to dinner, Julia found a nice little white flowers upon her serviette and written card attached to it was this message—"With pectful love and good wishes, from Smith and C

"Oh! Cox!" cried Julia, the tears springing in her eyes. As for Stephen Howard, he gave Cox sovereign for herself before he went away that night, and another one for Smith, and perhaps never in all this world did a posy of simple white flowers give so much pleasure to five people.

CHAPTER XI.

THE GREAT ST. EVE'S ROBBERY.

"Be of good cheer! for if we love one another,
Nothing in truth can harm us."—EVANGELINE.

THAT evening Stephen Howard went back to Brentwood where he found his sister alone, in the little drawing-room or boudoir, reading a book. She looked up as he entered and laid her book down on her knee.

"Well?" she said in a questioning tone.

"Well," he returned half smiling—"it's all right—I've done it."

Mrs. Bob at once jumped up, letting her book fall just as Mrs. Trafford had done a few hours before. "My dear boy," she cried—"you don't mean it. You are sure you really like her, Stevie?"

I am quite sure," he said steadily. "You ppose I should be such a fool as to marry any other woman if I didn't?"

Well, one never knows," Mrs. Bob answered, then she put her arms round his neck and gged him tenderly. "I *hope* you will be very appy, dear Steve," she said fondly—"but it's a isk, my dear, in our circumstances."

"Oh! not a bit of it," he returned confidently.

"But she will know nothing of——"

"Nothing," he broke in sharply.

"But won't that make things more difficult for you, or at least a little awkward?"

"I don't think so; on the contrary, in fact, for everything will work better," he answered.

Mrs. Bob sat down in her chair again and looked up at him anxiously. "She is a nice girl, Stevie, a dear girl and a good girl too, I am sure—and she's fond of you too."

"Yes, she's fond of me," he repeated tenderly.

"I don't know that it's quite fair not to tell her everything," Mrs. Bob went on dreamily.

"Oh! nonsense—absurd—is it likely?" he burst out. "Why, she might see everything in just a wrong light and—and I can't bear the idea of losing her, Maimie—I daren't risk it, so don't suggest such a thing to me again."

"But you'll take care to provide against any accidents," Mrs. Bob urged. "You'll make settlements?"

"I shall settle twenty thousand on her."

"Twenty thousand! It's a big set... Stevie—still, it will be better and she will b... whatever happens. And what did her mother about it?"

"She asked what you would say," he answered.

"I—Oh! you might have told her that I am delighted about it, delighted."

"Yes, I told her I was sure you would be."

"That was right. I will go and see them to-morrow," she said carelessly. "Are you going to Town to-morrow?"

"Yes, by the mail—I shall be early enough."

"Yes, and you will be able to buy her an engagement ring if you haven't done so already."

"Yes," he said—"I am going to get it in the morning."

"Diamonds, of course?"

"Yes—she chose diamonds."

"Ah!—her taste agrees with mine. Wasn't it lucky that Violet Lucifer insisted on my wearing that butterfly on that particular evening? I really do look upon that as a special providence. I should have been sorry to part with it. I could never have happened to meet with a big ruby of the right colour again, could I?"

"Not very easily," he replied.

"Oh! here's Bob. Bob," cried the little lady—"Steve has gone and done it."

"Done it? What, you mean the little widow's daughter? Well, my boy, I hope it will be all right, that I do," and he came across the room and

Stephen's hand hard. "I hope you'll be , old chap, and the little woman too."

"hank you, Bob," said Stephen heartily.

Then she's to know nothing?" Bob went on esently.

"Absolutely nothing," Stephen answered.

"And if she finds out?" the other enquired.

"She will not find out," Stephen said promptly.

"All the better," rejoined Bob Markham, with decision. "Well, Maimie, I suppose you'll go in and talk the whole business over to-morrow with Mrs. Trafford? Yes. Well, you can give the bride a handsome present from us both and don't stint the price of it."

"Very well," she returned.

Thus the announcement of Stephen Howard's engagement to Julia was made to his own people, and the following day Mrs. Bob got into her Victoria and drove to No. 7 to express to Mrs. Trafford and Julia the delight that the news had given her.

"Dear Mrs. Trafford, I am so glad, so very very glad," she exclaimed, quite rushing into Mrs. Trafford's arms—"Stephen is such a dear dear boy, and he will make her such a good husband. And we have been so anxious that he should marry and he has been so long in finding the right one, but now that he has found her I cannot tell you how very very glad I am."

"And I am glad too," said Mrs. Trafford graciously She felt that she was in the position of the approached instead of the approaching and that

it became her to be gracious but not gushing. Time had been when Mrs. Trafford would have gushed a good deal over Stephen Howard to his sister, but Mrs. Trafford was a woman on whom the lessons of time and experience were not thrown away; indeed she profited by every lesson she had ever had.

"I think they will be very happy," Mrs. Bob went on—"they are so suited to each other and Stevie is perfectly devoted to her. He has been down this morning, of course. At least," with a gay little laugh, "he disappeared very early from our horizon."

"Yes, he was here rather early," Mrs. Trafford answered—"and I think they are not far away now. Julia said they would be here at tea-time."

"Then if you will ask me I will wait and see her. I may? Oh! then shall I send the carriage home? they can come back at half-past six! Yes, I must go then. We are dining at the Bishop's."

So Mrs. Bob took off her seal-skin coat and settled down for a long chat with Mrs. Trafford on the subject which was just uppermost in the minds of both of them.

"I suppose they have not decided where to live or anything yet," Mrs. Bob went on. "Do I mind where? No, not a bit—it is all pretty near together in England. I rather think Steve has a fancy for a house in Town, as head quarters you know, but, of course, he will have to hear what the lady has to say about it."

"I think Julia would prefer that," Mrs. Trafford said.

"Ah! yes. Of course, they will be very well off. By the bye, has Stevie said anything to you about settlements?"

"No, not yet. I have hardly seen him this morning," Mrs. Trafford answered.

"He talks of settling twenty thousand on her, for her own use of course. And for the rest, well Stevie has been very lucky in his business affairs. He cannot have less than four thousand a year."

"I did not know that Stephen had any profession," Mrs. Trafford said in surprise.

"No profession, dear Mrs. Trafford, but he has a good deal of property which all takes a good deal of looking after. Stevie has never trusted his affairs to other people, which I call very wise; when I spoke of his being lucky in business affairs I meant in ways connected with his property. For instance he sold our father's estate in Queensland for far more than we ever expected it would make. And then he does a good deal of chopping and changing with his shares and things—Oh! *I* can't tell you but he has always had luck and he has a long head too."

Well, as Mrs. Trafford said, that was her last day of peace. Everybody was pressing for a short engagement and a speedy marriage. The Markhams urged it. Stephen Howard prayed for it. Julia shyly said that she wished it.

In vain did Mrs. Trafford suggest three months

as a fitting and suitable time, in vain equally did she sue for at least half that period—they were four to one and they all talked at her with such earnestness that at last she gave a somewhat reluctant consent to an engagement of only a month's duration. But as she said it was a time that she felt a little ashamed of, she felt she should have to explain to all the town the reason for so short an engagement, which was very awkward as she had no adequate reason to give.

They had had a jubilant telegram of congratulation during the course of the morning from Laura Staunton, and a letter followed which said that they were coming straight to Blankhampton on the first of November, and added that she, Lady Staunton, was simply dying to see Julie's choice.

And on November the first, the Stauntons arrived in time for dinner, Laura in a great state of excitement and full of fondest congratulations. "And he is really very nice, Julia?" she asked, having invaded the sacred recesses of her sister's bedroom.

"There he is," answered Julia holding out a large cabinet photograph of Stephen.

"Oh! my dear, he is splendidly handsome." Laura cried with genuine admiration—"if he is half as nice as he looks, you are a lucky girl. Really, Julie, has it ever struck you lately, that we three girls have been extraordinarily lucky?"

"Yes. And we have to thank Mother for a good deal," answered Julia gravely.

"Yes. Mother has always been very good to us.

She is so judicious. Why, if it hadn't been for her, we might have come to Blankhampton like the Mornington Browns and here we might have stuck just as they have done. I don't know that we are as good-looking as the Mornington-Browns take us both all round."

"Oh! yes, we are," Julia returned coolly. "They are not much to look at when you take Tina's yellow hair away. The other one is a frump. You know it doesn't do to be a frump, though you can be as ugly as you like."

"Yes, there's something in that," murmured Lady Staunton thoughtfully. "By the by, Madge sent you all sorts of the tenderest messages. She was quite wild about it, when I went to tell her the news. All her regret was that she couldn't possibly come to see you before the great event comes off.

"Dear Madge—and how is she?" Julia cried.

"Oh! fairly well. Marky is tremendously devoted and she has exquisite tea-gowns. For the rest you know it is dreadfully weary work waiting for the heir."

"And if it is a girl?"

"Well, I daresay the Ceesprings will be a little sorry. I don't think Madge cares which it is and I'm sure Marky does not, so long as Madge is all right."

Well, a few minutes afterwards Cox came to say that Mr. and Mrs. Markham had come, so the sisters went down together. And really, though there had

used to be a considerable difference between them in point of looks, Sir Anthony Staunton noticed at once that there was now but very little to choose between them. True, Julia looked a little older than his wife and perhaps a little less pretty, but the change in her was simply startling. And so ran the thoughts of Mr. and Mrs. Bob. "My dear," said Mrs. Bob in a whisper to her brother's fiancée—"you should not tell people that your sister is very pretty—it sounds so conceited."

"Conceited," echoed Julia — "About one's sister?"

"No, not about your *sister*, Puss," Mrs. Bob laughed. "But when your sister is so ridiculously like yourself—"

"Laurie like me," cried Julia, in genuine amazement.

"Yes, as like as two peas," answered Mrs. Bob smiling. "By the bye, Stevie will be here in a moment or so. He has gone down to the jeweller's to get your bracelet."

"Oh! how good of him," Julia cried.

In less than five minutes Stephen Howard came.

"By the bye, there's no end of a row going on at the end of the street," he said eagerly. "That pretty Mrs. Lovelace has had every scrap of jewelry she possessed stolen this afternoon."

"Mrs. Lovelace," screamed Julia.

"Must be the same gang that got your things, Maimie," said Stephen. "I stopped to ask the man who runs the house about it. It seems that the

Lovelaces have stayed at this house whenever they are in Blankhampton for years, the drawing-room floor is theirs, as a matter of fact."

"Yes — yes — we know — go on," cried Mrs. Trafford.

"And somehow or other this afternoon an individual quietly walked in and fetched the things away, but whether it was a man or a woman they don't know or exactly when it took place."

Mrs. Bob began to look horribly scared! "Oh! Bob, I feel so frightened. You shall not buy me any more diamonds or anything else whilst we are in Blankhampton or at least not until this gang is captured."

"Laura, my child, I trust you have not brought your sapphires here," exclaimed Mrs. Trafford suddenly.

"I am afraid I have, dear," Lady Staunton replied.

"Then Anthony, go and fetch them, my dear, and we will take them down to dinner with us, and to-morrow if you please we will have them put into the Bank for safe keeping. They are the finest sapphires in England," she added to Mrs. Bob, "and I would not have the responsibility of keeping them in my house for all the world. You are most foolish Laura to carry them about the country with you."

"But I want to wear them, dear," Laura protested.

"You won't be able to wear them if you lose

them, you know," Mrs. Bob put in. "I had a nice little collection of diamonds a few days ago, and now you see all my wealth. I wear these every night and nearly all day for fear I lose them too. In fact, I may as well confess among ourselves—when I cannot wear them suitably outside my frock I wear them underneath it. If I were you I should wear as many of your sapphires about you as you can."

"Oh! no," Laura cried with a laugh—"they are too large and too heavy; they would show."

"That is what I should do," said Mrs. Bob wisely.

"But how could they know just when to slip into Mrs. Lovelace's room?" Mrs. Trafford asked.

"Thieves know everything," Stephen Howard answered. "How did they find out just the position of my sister's room at Matcham, where her box stood, what kind of box it was? How did they know the exact moment to choose them and get off clear with plunder from two different parts of the house? Oh! thieves are marvellous creatures."

"I have never felt very sure of your maid," remarked Mrs. Trafford.

"Oh! she is honest as the day. Besides, she could have taken them over and over again if she had wanted. I had her from Lady Lauderton—or rather from her daughter Mrs. Stonor. She was there eleven years and only left when Lady Lauderton died. Oh no, she is quite innocent of that. I have the utmost confidence in her."

"And her mother did die," remarked Bob.

Then Cox came to say that dinner was served, and they all went down, Sir Anthony, with a comical expression, carrying his wife's jewel-case under his arm.

"Put it on the chimney-shelf, Anthony," said Mrs. Trafford—"where I can keep my eye on it. Dear me, poor Mrs. Lovelace, I do feel most sorry for her."

"Yes, poor thing, so do I," echoed Julia, thinking of Captain Legard and Pamela Winstanley and how he had played off one against the other and ended by throwing over both. Poor little soul, with her bold little dark face and her blazing black eyes, it was hard really that she should have lost her jewels; and yet, it seemed almost like a judgment upon her for her folly in flirting so desperately as she undoubtedly had done, when she had a quite charming husband always at hand who would have been proud to gratify her every whim—yes, it was really like a judgment!

So they dined in great merriment with the Staunton sapphires safely reposing on the chimney-shelf, and after dinner Laura with much pride showed them to the Markhams and Stephen Howard.

"My dear," said little Mrs. Bob at parting—"take my advice—Wear those sapphires about you, wear them under your clothes. Banks may be broken into almost as easily as houses—nobody can take your sapphires away by violence, at least not in such circumstances as are likely to be yours."

"Oh! Anthony keeps a revolver by him at night," said Laura confidently.

"Burglars are generally very near shots," answered Mrs. Bob. "Anyway, remember what I say. I wear mine all day, and I push them between the mattresses at night. Well, you may laugh, but it's true—I do really."

CHAPTER XII.

MISS ALICE'S DOUBLE.

"Never mind what a man's virtues are; waste no time in learning them. Fasten at once on his infirmities."—LYTTON.

By the next morning all Blankhampton was in a blaze of excitement about the robbery of Mrs. Lovelace's jewels. She had never been much liked in the town, having from remote times gone in largely for what in country towns is known as "carrying on." Her equals objected to it because they had a sort of vague starched idea that it was not the right kind of thing, that it let down their class and lowered their order; her rivals hated her little ways because they did not care about being left out in the cold, and where Mrs. Lovelace was there it generally happened the men were to be found also, and in a way not very well calculated to please the other belles of the place; her inferiors said openly enough that they did not think the lady's carryings on respectable.

Yet—though nobody was really in their hearts very sorry for Mrs. Lovelace's loss—the entire population of Blankhampton went into a fever of excitement over the robbery itself. It was too dreadful that anything so bold, so impudent, should have happened in their unsuspecting midst, that while the old ladies were out with their card-cases or perhaps the young ones were deep in their devotions at the Parish, a thief had boldly walked into a house in a well-frequented thoroughfare and had carried off a box of jewels.

It was reasonable enough to the Blankhampton people that a gang of thieves should put a ladder against Lady Lucifer's window and make themselves too painfully at home in her private apartments, while as for that Mrs. Markham, well, they simply thought it was too disgusting that an Australian squatter's wife (Australians are all supposed to be squatters to deep-rooted folk such as gather around the stately Cathedrals of this country) should ever have possessed such a wealth of beautiful jewels, a woman who had probably been quite a low creature to begin with, such as made Blankhampton people wonder what Lady Lucifer could be thinking of to strike up an intimate friendship with her, and even invite her to stay in her house.

But when these thieves came into the very midst of the Town, when they could walk boldly into a lady's room in the middle of the afternoon and help themselves, then it was indeed coming home to them, and society talked about nothing else. And

then when society had talked it well over—society in the shape of Mrs. Fairlie and Mrs. John Doughty, Mrs. Monson and the young lady with the nose—society went home and locked away its tea-spoons, its imitation pearls and its brilliant paste ornaments. Ah! dear, but this is a funny world.

In Eve's, however, the excitement was even deeper, and the inhabitants of the houses which had not been robbed felt as people sometimes feel when the next-door house has been struck with lightning, and like a man does when he finds himself in the midst of a railway accident and the man next to him is struck dead by his side.

"Do you know," said Julia during the course of that dinner, while the Staunton sapphires graced the chimney-shelf—"do you know I saw Alice Mauleverer go in to the Lovelaces' about half-past four to-day?"

"Did you?" somebody asked.

"Yes. I was standing in the window watching the lamplighter light the lamps—it was barely dark. And I saw Alice Mauleverer cross the road just here and go into the corner-house. She opened the door and went in—as she always does."

"Did you see her leave?" her mother enquired.

"No—I did not wait to see if she stayed or not. I noticed that the lights were not burning—indeed I had seen Mrs. Lovelace go across the road towards the Mauleverers' house about half an hour before."

"It would have been odd if Miss Mauleverer

had gone in just at the right moment, wouldn't it?" said Lady Staunton excitedly.

However, the following day it transpired that Miss Alice Mauleverer had never been near the corner-house, that Mrs Lovelace had gone to see her friends at No. 10 quite early in the afternoon and had stayed there chatting with them until it was time for her to go home and dress for the dinner at the deanery to which she was bidden, when she had immediately missed the jewel-box. And the odd part of it was that not one of the three Miss Mauleverers had left the room during the two hours of her visit even for a minute.

During the course of the next day a messenger came over to Julia from Mrs. Lovelace. Would she go over for five minutes? And of course Julia went and was shown up to Mrs. Lovelace's room where she found one or two business-like men in plain clothes together with the three Mauleverer spinsters and Major and Mrs. Lovelace.

Mrs. Lovelace apologised for having troubled her —"You know that I have lost all my jewels," she said.

"Yes—and most sorry we are for you," said Julia kindly.

"Well—these gentlemen are detectives, and one of them has heard that you said at dinner last night, when you were all talking of this affair that you saw one of my friends here—Miss Alice Mauleverer—cross the road and go in at the door below."

"Yes. I did," said Julia—"about half-past four."

"But do you know that I was in their drawing-room yesterday afternoon from four to six o'clock and that the three Miss Mauleverers were there and never left it for one minute during the whole of that time?"

For a moment Julia was thunderstruck—she sat and stared at Alice Mauleverer until the ancient damsel began to simper and then to blush. "I was never so much mistaken in my life then," she cried —Julia I mean.

"And," Mrs. Lovelace went on—"Clark tells me that about that time he was coming down stairs and that he met Miss Mauleverer on the landing—he told her that I was out and that he believed I had gone over to No. 10. 'Yes,' she answered, 'she is there now, but I have come over for a bottle of throat lozenges which Mrs. Lovelace wants.' He went down to get a light having just used his last match and when he came back the lady was at the door. 'Don't trouble about a light, Clark,' she said—'I have got them. They were on the table,' and then she went out and Clark shut the door behind her."

"Well, that bears out what I said," exclaimed Julia in great bewilderment, thinking wildly that surely the Mauleverers could not have suddenly turned kleptomaniacs.

"No Miss Mauleverer came here—not one of them was out of my sight from four to six o'clock," Mrs. Lovelace replied. "The person you saw and

Clark here saw, was a made-up Miss Mauleverer—" here Julia involuntarily gave a glance at the three weird sisters on the other side of the room, only a flicker of a glance and yet a protest in itself against the literal truth of Mrs. Lovelace's words—" That was the person who stole my jewels."

" Mrs. Lovelace ! " Julia exclaimed.

" Yes. That is why I sent for you. It is to know if you can help us—if you really saw the woman, if you can describe her or give us the least clue by which we can trace her ? "

Julia shook her head. " I could only tell you that I thought I saw Miss Alice Mauleverer—I could not describe the woman more closely than that," she said. " Why don't you ask Clark ? He spoke to her, and must have seen her better than I."

" No—Clark had been upstairs and had just used his last match. He met her on a landing, just outside the door here in fact, which is never too well lighted even in the morning and he like you thought it was Miss Mauleverer and had no suspicion otherwise until I got home and found that the jewel-case had gone. But what we want to know from you is how was she dressed ? "

" Oh ! I can tell you that although the dusk was just beginning to fall—" Julia replied. " She had a dark red dress on with a lot of black braiding on the skirt. I have seen Miss Mauleverer in just such a dress," she added—" in fact I think I saw you in it yesterday, and I never noticed that there was any difference."

"Yes. I was wearing it yesterday," said Miss Alice.

"Then she had a short seal-skin coat, tight fitting, and a tall black hat. For the rest I can really tell you nothing except that she opened the door and went in, as I have sometimes seen the Miss Mauleverers do."

"And she stayed ——" Mrs. Lovelace said eagerly.

"I don't know. I did not wait to see," said Julia simply.

"And you can tell us nothing more?" exclaimed Mrs. Lovelace in evident disappointment.

"I am very sorry—" Julia answered, "but I am afraid I cannot."

"But you would know her if you saw her—you would be able to swear to her," she cried anxiously.

"I don't know," said Julia, with a deprecating smile, "but I think I shall never dare to swear to anything. I believe if I saw Miss Alice Mauleverer and that person going across the road, that I should not know which was which. I only wish I *could* swear to her—I would swear hard, I promise you."

She took leave of them then, shook hands with Mrs. Lovelace, who was looking very anxious and ill, made a very stiff little bow to the ancient damsels, and allowed Major Lovelace to precede her downstairs. And then when he had seen her to the doorstep and she had spoken a few words of

pity for his wife in her misfortune, she went home to No. 7, where she found Stephen.

To the select audience gathered there she detailed the whole scene, how Mrs. Lovelace had looked, how the three aristocratic spinsters from No. 10 had looked, and lastly how Miss Alice had actually brought herself to speak to the obnoxious young person from No. 7.

"And," said Julia at last—"then I told Mrs. Lovelace that if I could see the person and Miss Alice go across the road together I was quite sure I should not know the one from the other, and then I think they were satisfied that it was no use tolerating my presence any longer, so they let me come away."

"I am quite relieved that you would not know the woman again," said Stephen Howard at this point.

"Yes—why?"

"Because I have no fancy for being kept waiting about for you to give evidence and perhaps our marriage put off for it," he answered.

"Oh! but if they catch anybody they think likely, I shall have to give evidence all the same," Julia cried.

"Are you sure?" he exclaimed.

"Perfectly sure," she answered.

"Oh! I think you are wrong."

"My dear," said Julia decidedly—"I don't think your opinion on the subject is worth having. What can a mere savage like you know about the English law?"

"Perhaps I know more than you give me credit for," he cried, with an amused laugh.

However, the days went by without Julia Trafford being called upon to give evidence concerning the person whom she had seen go across the road and enter the house at the corner of the street, and when, by and by, the excitement in the town had subsided a little and the sacred entrée dishes at the River House were again brought forth from the fastness in which they had been kept since Mrs. Lovelace's diamonds had gone the way of most diamonds, and the townsfolk in general began to enjoy the pleasure of using their silver tea-spoons again, and the young ladies to wear their pearls on occasion and the older ones their paste, then Blankhampton awoke to the fact that another good match had been snapped up by the insatiable maw which put on the top of its note paper, "No. 7, St. Eve's, Blankhampton."

The Blankhampton matrons were all agreed for once in a way, and the Blankhampton virgins went their way to the Parish and piously thanked Heaven that Mrs. Trafford had no more daughters to dispose of. And really when you came to look at it from their point of view it was hard, very hard, that one family should have secured three such men as had eaten and would eat their wedding breakfasts at No. 7, St. Eve's.

There had been a great deal of talk about the two Antrobus marriages, but To-To Antrobus's splendour had faded into the merest twilight long

before her sister's glory had burst over her native town. And Polly's jewelry had all been bought in London, while Stephen Howard went and bought most of his at the chief jeweller's in the High Street, a wonderful shop where everybody who was anybody was on the most friendly terms and from whence a good many of the curious gathered the information that little Miss Trafford's engagement ring had been bought there for a consideration of sixty pounds, that the gentleman had bought a beautiful diamond bracelet which they happened to have in stock and that he had ordered a brooch formed of his own name in diamonds and had asked them to get a handsome necklace or two down for her to choose from.

Mr. Markham also had been in and had brought some diamonds for his wife's birthday and had had a talk to them about the wedding-present from his wife and himself to Miss Trafford; so Blankhampton knew that there was no deception or even exaggeration about the matter, knew that they at No. 7 had taken at the flood that tide which leads to fame and fortune.

"I can't think how they do it," cried Mrs. Mornington-Brown plaintively to her eldest daughter, the one whom Julia had called a frump!

"Push!" replied Miss Mornington-Brown tartly.

"It really is strange," sighed the old lady, who was very delicate and very primly shadowy in her whole person, "I should have thought when Tina came here first—why she was quite a child—I

should have thought she would have married at once. But somehow the men seem to think nothing of beauty. Tina is a beauty."

"Yes, Tina is a beauty," said the elder sister, who had long ago given up all idea of resigning her appointment to St. Catherine.

"Mrs. Trafford seems to be the great woman here," said the mother of the newly-arrived nine daughters to her eldest girl, Miss Chadd. "Everybody is talking about her and half the people envying her. Her youngest daughter married Sir Anthony Staunton and her niece who lived with them married Marcus Orford, Lord Ceespring's only son. And now her eldest girl, quite a plain little thing, Mrs. Morecombe told me, is going to marry this handsome young Australian millionaire. I think we shall have to get to know her."

"I certainly should," returned Carmine Chadd, who had no notion whatever of sitting quietly down in Blankhampton to see what fate would send her.

"How happy Julia Trafford is," said Aileen Adair, the Dean's lovely daughter, to Pamela Winstanley as they went home across the Close a few days before the wedding.

"Yes," said Pamela, holding her head very high as she thought of her own blighted hopes and the smart 32nd who had gone out with all gaiety and gladness to the tune of "The girl I leave behind me." "Yes. I am very glad Julia is making such a nice marriage. He is quite the man of her heart."

"Oh! quite," returned Aileen, with a soft little sigh.

She was rather tired that evening, her back ached and she had been bridesmaid so many times since she had come to Blankhampton, and she began to feel like the Bishop's eldest daughter often looked—look like her she never could. And she had a liking for Anthony Mauleverer, and fancied, nay knew that Anthony liked her too. But that was hopeless, quite hopeless, and so she gave that soft little sigh as they walked along.

"Dear Mrs. Trafford," said Mrs. Fairlie sweetly the first time they met after the engagement was announced, "I am so glad, so glad. You will let us know in good time that we may send our little offering, won't you?" and then the Blankhampton Lily went on her elaborate way rejoicing for the first time since the great St. Eve's robbery in all the glory of a newly-shaven poodle-dog wearing his well-polished silver collar, bells and bangles.

It happened that when these two ladies met and exchanged their greetings in the High Street, on the opposite side of the way two persons were standing talking together. And when Mrs. Trafford and Mrs. Fairlie parted, the younger of the two, one Roberts, a minor-canon at the Parish, said to the other who was a man holding a like appointment—"'Pon my word, Molyneux, that woman must be going off her head. Look at that dog."

The elder man turned and watched the two go up the street, took it all in—the hen-like walk, the

Pompadour stick with its big silver knob, the noticeable dog with its silver collar and bells and its silver bangles on its legs—and gave a short laugh.

"Isn't it astounding that Fairlie *lets* her make such a fool of herself?" Roberts went on.

The older man laughed again.

"What would you do if your wife got herself up in that style?" he asked.

"I wouldn't have it," said Roberts promptly.

"And if she would—what would you do then?" asked the other.

The younger parson stared at his fellow priest for a minute. "Well, I think I should cut it," he said at last.

"So does Fairlie, as much as is practicable," said Molyneux.

How odd fashion is! I have often wondered who set the fashions in Blankhampton! Not the Blankhampton Lily, that is certain, else the old town would have come out in an eruption of be-jewelled bow-wows. But still somebody must do it, and the mention of Mrs. Fairlie's Pompadour stick reminds me that the very last time I was there I was much struck with a fashion which had not only obtained but was universal.

The time was mid-winter, the weather something more than broken, the state of the quaint old streets filthy. And every lady under forty, and a good many over it, carried a stick—it was quite the badge of fashion! Not a little lady-like fancy affair but a good stout solid stick with a good stout

business-like crutch handle, an excellent help in tramping over Scotch moors, along the coast, or for Swiss mountains, excellent for a poor soul with a club foot or a weak knee. Gaily enough the short-skirted Blankhampton damsels flourished these thumping great sticks around, but for a pathetic sight I commend you to a spinster of certain age, with skirts kilted half way to the knee (a process which usually occupies both hands) daintily picking her way through three inches of liquid mud, while the stout stick is grasped in the middle by the already occupied hand and swings to and fro like the balancing pole of a tight-rope walker. Ye Gods! it is a sight to make the angels weep.

CHAPTER XIII.

UNBIDDEN VISITORS.

"A poor man, though living in the crowded mart, no one will notice; a rich man, though dwelling amid the remote hills, his distant relatives will visit."

—CHINESE PROVERB.

IN due time Julia Trafford's wedding came off and was pronounced by connoisseurs in that kind of function to be the prettiest wedding that had been seen in Blankhampton for a long time. To Mrs. Trafford it was a particularly joyous occasion although she cried a little during the ceremony. She knew that it was probably the last time that they would all appear together in public in the old

city. There was Lady Staunton in a delicate mauve and white gown, looking very happy and proud of her handsome husband. And there was Madge Orford, proud in the possession of a small pink and white heir to the old name, Madge herself looking delicate and evidently the object of much care to Marcus whose brave grey eyes never wandered very far away from his wife's charming face. No wonder as the crowded congregation saw the little widow and her family, that they said in their hearts or whispered in each other's ears that she was a wonderful little woman, as clever as she was high.

Then there was a smart breakfast in St. Eve's afterwards and an afternoon reception to see the bride and groom leave and to view the wedding presents.

Julia went away almost smothered in rich furs amid universal good wishes, and then the company turned their attention to the presents. Such an array, filtering down in costliness from the beautiful diamond jewelry given by the groom, the Markhams and the Ceesprings, the silver plate given by the Marcus Orfords, the Stauntons, the Lucifers and a host of other people, to the piece of needle-work which was the gift of Elizabeth Damerel, the china plaque given by dear Lady Margaret Adair and the olive-wood box which came from the Mornington Browns.

Mrs. Fairlie's little offering took the form of a Pompadour stick of white wood with a huge ivory knob on top held in place by a circle of gold on

which was graven Julia's married initials and the date of her wedding day. "It's a sweet thing," said Julia holding it out and looking at it doubtfully, when she had unfolded the many wrappings of tissue paper in which it was enveloped—"but—but isn't it a little *tall* for me?"

Lady Staunton went off into a gay fit of laughter. "My dear child," she cried—"the thing is nearly as tall as yourself. You never can carry it out—you will have a mob after you to a certainty if you do. Remember that you are a little thing and have not the advantage of Mrs. Fairlie's height—Hey, what do you say?"

"Nobody calls her Mrs. Fairlie now," exclaimed Julia holding the long white wand at arm's length —"except to her face, that is. She has budded into 'The Blankhampton Lily.'"

"Lor!" cried Lady Staunton. "Well, then I'll tell you what I should do with the Lily's white Pompadour if I were you. I should just wait till I got my house and then I should give it a special niche in your own boudoir. You are sure to have a white and yellow boudoir, and if you stand the Pomp' up against the new fashioned white wood chimney-shelf, it will look lovely. But walk out with it you can't and that is a certainty."

"Not with me," put in Stephen at this moment.

So Mrs. Stephen Howard did not take the Pompadour stick away on her honey-moon and it remained among the other presents for Blankhampton society to look over and comment upon.

Mrs. Lovelace and her Major had sent a pretty little brooch with a jewelled fly reposing on it, and Mrs. Lovelace had looked one of the prettiest women present at the ceremony. But she looked ill, everybody noticed that and more than one person was heard to say that really she seemed to have taken the loss of her jewelry very badly.

All the same there were one or two who guessed that there was another and a very different reason than the loss of her jewels which was at the bottom of Mrs. Lovelace's altered looks and graver smiles. Pamela Winstanley, for instance, with her own head held higher in air than she had ever held it in all her life before, which is saying a good deal, knew well enough what was in the heart of her rival—her rival, good Heavens, she meant her sister, for did not she and Mrs. Lovelace stand on the same battle-field and had not Captain Legard loved or pretended that he loved and then ridden away alike from them both.

More than once Pamela's pale eyes had met Mrs. Lovelace's great black ones, and not wishing to seem to be watching her, she had turned her head away quickly and with a gesture which seemed to the other to be one of triumph. Ah, if only she had known about that little incident in Mrs. Trafford's drawing-room, when the star of Pamela Winstanley had paled before the sun of Florence Doughty!

Well, the excitement attending Julia Trafford's wedding passed away and the robbery of Mrs. Lovelace's jewels ceased to be talked about, was

indeed well nigh forgotten, and then the Trafford household began to thin—the Stauntons went off to Town for a few days before paying their visit to the old ladies, and Marcus Orford and his wife went back to the regiment, having only had a few days' leave for the purpose of attending Julia's wedding. So Mrs. Trafford was left quite alone and she declared that she felt quite glad to be quiet and live for herself after the excitement and worry of the past two years.

"Dull, my dear," she said to Mina de Lisle who came to commiserate with her on her lonely state—"no, I am never dull—I have always plenty to do and my friends are very kind. But really I am only now beginning to breathe again. Two engagements going on in the house together are bad enough, but an engagement of only a month in length is a matter of cruelty to everybody concerned."

"Are you going to remain in Blankhampton, Mrs. Trafford," Mina asked. "I hope you are. Everybody will miss you dreadfully if you leave it."

"I shall not leave for the present, my dear," Mrs. Trafford replied. "You see I have this house on my hands till next October and I know so many people here that I do not think of leaving before next Autumn."

"I hope you won't leave it then," cried Mina.

Mrs. Trafford laughed—"Oh! my dear, you may have left it yourself long before next October."

"Yes, that is so—but then I may not," answered Mina with a blush that was a little juvenile for her years.

"Well, we shall see," said Mrs. Trafford. "One never quite knows how to look forward when there are daughters to take into consideration. Really if anybody had told me three months ago that I should be here alone in my house to-day and Julia wooed and married and all, I should have taken the liberty of saying that I thought they would prove themselves wrong. And yet Julia is married and here I am all by myself."

But Mrs. Trafford did not find herself left very much alone. Her friends came to see her duly and truly and especially did the young ladies get into the habit of going in at all times—just to cheer dear Mrs. Trafford up, they said. And before long the young men also got into a habit of going in to have a cup of tea with her, and while Marcus Orford and Sir Anthony were in Blankhampton they naturally went and called on the incoming regiment which had relieved the 32nd, and equally naturally they took several of the officers to call at No. 7, and very soon it became one of the popular houses in the town among the officers of the 43rd (Princess Mary's Own) Hussars.

About this time the Bob Markhams went up to Town for a few days, but when they got back to Brentwood, Mrs. Bob drove over and insisted upon taking Mrs. Trafford back for a day or two. She tried hard to get out of it but Mrs. Bob would not

hear a word about that—they were going to have an impromptu dinner party the next evening, the Lucifers and some people who were staying there and one or two others. It was no use Mrs. Trafford declaring that she really wanted rest and quiet more than anything else, Mrs. Bob meant her to go and said so, she would not take no for an answer and simply said she would not leave the house alone.

So Mrs. Trafford had no choice but to get her things put together and submit to the inevitable, and I must admit that she enjoyed herself very much when she got there. And whilst she was there, the neighbourhood was again thrown into a kind of convulsion by the news that another great robbery of jewels had been committed!

Little Mrs. Bob was eloquent about it. "Oh! Mrs. Trafford," she cried—"I do get so frightened by all this. I really almost wish that we had never come into this neighbourhood at all. Yes, I do really. I know I shall never know a moment's peace when we get to the Manor Lodge, and of course, if you visit much you must have silver and so on. You can make a very good show with just as many diamonds as you can carry about your person—but you can't carry your dishes and your spoons and forks about with you, can you?"

"Well, not very comfortably," said Mrs. Trafford, with a laugh. "But, if you are so frightened you can buy electro-plate instead of silver—nobody will want to steal that."

Mrs. Bob looked doubtful. "Bob wouldn't like

that, I'm sure," she said. "He is so odd about those things. 'If you can't have real things, don't have them at all,' he always says, and I believe he'd rather eat with his fingers than use what he calls sham things. Yes, I know it's very silly, but men who have roughed it a good deal are like that. Bob really hates display of any kind but he does like to have what he has good."

"But the gang have cleared you fairly well out," cried Mrs. Trafford—"and surely, after getting all those thousands of pounds' worth of jewels out of you, they would never have the heart to come back for your spoons and forks."

"I don't know," Mrs. Bob answered. "Thieves are queer sort of people, you know. They don't stop to think whether the women who own the jewels they steal will mind the loss of them. They just look upon the possessor of jewels as a sort of gold mine which they may as well help themselves to as not. If they stopped to think, they would never do it and I should still have all the pretty things that Bob has bought me from time to time since we were married. All the same I do owe this gang something. They gave me back my locket and, after all, I set more store by that than I do by all the rest."

"I think they will let you off any further toll," said Mrs. Trafford—"they will never have the conscience to come your way again."

"I hope not," said Mrs. Bob simply—"but I never feel very safe. What I have left is quite worth

coming back for. However,"—she went on—"Bob is making arrangements to have a strong-room put in the house before we go to Manor Lodge, and then, as he says, we shall lock everything up the first week or two and after awhile we shall get careless and forget and then one fine morning we shall come down and find everything gone."

"I am sure I hope not," said Mrs. Trafford—"but in any case, whatever happens, you are fully prepared for the worst."

The new outrage had been perpetrated on the house of a very rich lady living about four miles from Blankhampton. This lady had been bidden to dine at the house of her married sister two or three miles away, and in accordance with her general custom on such occasions she had taken her butler and her footman with her to help to wait at table. And during their absence, while the rest of the servants were at supper, the gang had got in and had made a careful and clean sweep of everything; after which they coolly went along to the Palace of the great spiritual lord of the diocese, where they effected an entrance and helped themselves to such of the episcopal plate as they found adorning the great carved-oak sideboards and buffets in the Palace dining-room.

After this it is safe to say that the neighbourhood went mad with anger and fear, and the trade in thief-proof and fire-proof safes was so brisk that the makers had hard work to get them set in their places as fast as they were ordered. In the town itself the

excitement was fast and furious, the teaspoons disappeared again and the strings of pearls and the paste ornaments, and every evening about the hours of ten to twelve, you might hear such a rattling of chains and shooting of bolts, such a barring of windows and jingling of bells, that you might have imagined yourself in a prison for state criminals or in an asylum for dangerous lunatics. But, though half the detectives in Scotland Yard seemed to make their appearance at one time or other, ask questions and look wise, or prowl round and neither ask questions nor look anything one way or the other, there was not a trace to be found of the missing jewels and plate, not a single trace. In every case the work was done quietly, cleanly and expeditiously—"the gang," as everybody called them, left neither hand-prints nor foot-marks behind them—it was, in fact, as if the missing valuables had been spirited away.

Perhaps the only person in the town who did not seem particularly disturbed by all these dreadful occurrences was the little widow in St. Eve's. But, as she herself said, though of course she was dreadfully sorry for dear Lady Lucifer and Miss Lithgow, and for Mrs. Lovelace and the Bishop too, yet it really was no use her pretending to be in fear for herself. She had nothing to lose, she said, and it was well known that burglars never took the trouble to break into houses without being very sure beforehand what there was to get. "And as there is nothing to get here," explained Mrs. Trafford with

her little airy laugh—"why I know very well they won't come."

"And if they did?" asked Mrs. Bob, with a shudder.

"Well, if they did I should be very polite and I should say 'If you please, Mr. Burglar, there is nothing here. I will look the other way and swear anything you like, so long as you won't touch me.' And I believe," Mrs. Trafford ended—"that any well-conditioned burglar would act like a gentleman and go away. Yes, I do really."

"Horrid woman," muttered Mrs. Lovelace to her Major, "I wish they would go and give her a good fright. I wonder if one could get a couple of ruffians to go one night and see if she is as brave as her word. Upon my word, it would be worth a fiver for each of them."

CHAPTER XIV.

HOME AGAIN.

"We most willingly embrace the offer of your friendship.
What is this confounded cur?"
"It is my dog; love him for my sake."—ELIA.

MEANTIME Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Howard had been to Paris for a fortnight and had then returned to London, where they proposed staying until a few days before Christmas. They had quite decided upon making their head-quarters in Town and, as they

would be away so much, thought that it would be wisest for them to take a flat.

Julia—or as her husband now called her, Juey—had always had a fancy for a flat, a good flat at a rental of about four hundred a year; and this was not so difficult for them to find as she and her mother had not so very long before found the little *pied-à-terre* which they had sought so earnestly in the streets of Mayfair.

In writing to Laura Staunton, Julia said that she was having a lovely time. They had got a flat situate in the best part of Victoria Street and it was being fitted up to her exact taste in every way. Her boudoir was lined with yellow brocade, the colour of a buttercup, the hangings were of cream silk with gold embroideries, the furniture was entirely of white enamel with yellow brocade cushions. In one corner was a cabinet of old ivories, worth so much that Julia did not quite like to think of what they had cost, in another recess was a service of old red and gold Derby. There were fine old fans on the walls, neat little nests of book-shelves filled now with all Julia's favourite books bound to keep in harmony with the colouring of the room. There were all her own especial photographs set here and there and several of the cosiest settees possible and a charming cosy-corner on one side of the pretty fire-place, a corner for real luxurious ease among large and downy cushions clad in the smartest and richest of frocks and frills.

Nor was the boudoir the only pretty room in the

flat, the mistress's bedroom and the dressing-room and bath-room adjoining were dressed in a mixture of white enamel furniture and pale pink cretonne, with hangings to match and all sorts of neatly contrived nooks and corners of convenience—"And I think," said Julia after describing all these delights to Lady Staunton—"that I shall not want to go away from my beautiful home for a long long time."

However, two days before Christmas saw Stephen Howard and his wife on their way to Blankhampton, where they found Mrs. Trafford and Mrs. Bob waiting at the station to receive them. And then they drove to Brentwood, where Mrs. Trafford was also staying, and after that, there began a round of pleasure for Julia wherein she was the central figure. Everybody was glad to see her and everybody wanted her to go and see them; even the ancient damsels at No. 10 smiled quite graciously when they met her in the street and on one occasion condescended to utter half-a-dozen tolerably friendly sentences to her when they met her in a shop in the High Street.

By this time Mrs. Bob had become quite the most popular woman for several miles round Blankhampton. She was not inclined to be stand-off-ish towards anybody, and treated Mrs. John Doughty exactly the same as she treated any one of the Civic dignitaries. She did not seem to mind whether she was talking to the wife of the Lord Bishop or the spouse of the youngest parson attached to the Parish. Lady Lucifer was her great friend and Mrs. Trafford perhaps her next intimate, and for all the rest she

seemed to make no difference, and everybody excused her on the ground of her having been born on the other side of the world—"She's an Australian, you know, and people in these new countries are all so unconventional."

As for Bob himself, he was so much occupied by looking after the alterations and repairs at the Manor Lodge that he troubled himself very little about society one way or the other. He was always ready and in his place when there was a festivity of any kind on at Brentwood, and he was always dressed and ready when the carriage came to take them to any evening function at some one else's house—but he very seldom showed himself anywhere with his wife during the day except it was at the Parish on Sunday afternoon and afterwards in Mrs. Trafford's drawing-room. And whenever and wherever he was seen he was alike to all in his demeanour, always friendly in a hearty and unconventional sort of way, as ready to walk down the street with the dealer of whom he bought his horses as he was with the great John himself.

Bob Markham delighted the good people of Blankhampton hugely one morning by deliberately chaffing Mrs. Fairlie when he met her for the first time in company with the redoubtable black poodle. At first he did not see that the dog was with her, did not in fact see that the dog was there at all, but the Blankhampton Lily was rather a pretty woman and Bob Markham had an uncommonly keen eye for feminine looks.

So meeting her, he stopped short and enquired, in his hearty old-fashioned way, after her health, and Mrs. Fairlie was immediately all smiles and little airs and graces. Then while he still held her hand Bob caught sight of the dog—his gaze was rivetted upon it in a moment and he forgot to wait for her reply to his anxious question about the state of her health.

"Good God, Madam," he burst out—"do you see that brute with the bracelets on its legs? Who in the world can he belong to?"

"That is *my* dog, Mr. Markham," said Mrs. Fairlie very sweetly.

"*Yours!*" he echoed—then looked at her sharply, at the correct Directoire costume in which she was dressed, at the three-cornered felt hat with its long buckle of cut steel at one side, at the soft white frill falling from her collar, at her big buttons, her long stick, the broad silver buckles on her shoes, then back at the dog, after which he suddenly realized that the woman and the dog matched one another admirably. With the realization came a sense of the ridiculous side of the matter and Bob straightway went into an elaborate string of questions—Did she put his hair in papers at night? Did she have a jewel-box for his jewelry? Wasn't she afraid of the gang paying her a visit? And a great many more such questions all asked with such perfect good humour that the Lily had no opportunity of taking offence, and then at last they parted and he watched her go sailing up the street, he with

difficulty containing himself until she had got out of hearing. And then how he laughed, in fact he had to go into the gunsmith's near which they had stood while they talked, and there in safe retreat he sat and laughed until, as he told the gunsmith when he was able to speak, he thought he sho 'd have had a fit.

"Bob, you really ought not to do it," cried Mrs. Bob, when her husband repeated the story.

"But have you ever seen the brute?" he returned, chuckling at the very idea of it.

"Of course I have seen the dog," Mrs. Bob replied —"everybody has seen it except you, you dear old blind bat. That poodle is just now the very light of Mrs. Fairlie's eyes—it's like her stick, all her own. Why, not another woman in Blankhampton would dare to be seen with either. But all the same you must remember that Mrs. Fairlie is a very important person in the town, in her own estimation if in nobody else's, and it won't do for you to go offending her. Just fancy if anybody saw you actually laughing at her in the street."

"They did," shouted Bob, with a great laugh— "I just roared. And I tell you I had to go into Fuller's, the gunsmith's, and I laughed so I had to tell him what I was laughing at. I couldn't help myself."

"Oh! Fuller is safe enough—he won't talk about it to anybody likely to repeat it to the Fairlies," Mrs. Bob remarked. "But, all the same, Bob, I shouldn't go doing that kind of thing again if I were

you. Remember, we are new people here, and it won't be very pleasant if we begin by making ourselves unpopular."

Bob put on a look of comic dismay—"That is the way Maimie always bullies me," he remarked to Julia—"that's the way you will bully Steve when you have been married as many years as we have."

"Oh! very much worse than that," answered Julia gaily, and then she looked at Stephen and smiled and Stephen smiled back at her, and this sent Bob into such an ecstacy of enjoyment that he was obliged to wink at his wife and then bolt out of the room to have his laugh out elsewhere.

But nobody could be offended at Bob Markham's fun and Julia found him the most delightful brother-in-law in the whole world in spite of the fact that Anthony Staunton had his own tender niche within her heart.

And he was so generous too, for notwithstanding that but a few weeks before Julia's most beautiful wedding gift had come from the Markhams, she found among her letters on Christmas morning a receipted bill from Botwood of Ipswich for a charming single brougham, the like of which Julia had greatly envied his wife having the possession, that is if such a word can be applied to a genuine outspoken admiration for the belongings of another person.

Really there was ample grounds for the remark which Mrs. Trafford at that time was in the habit of making to such persons as questioned her about

the last marriage. "Oh! yes. I am perfectly satisfied with the marriage, perfectly."

Not that such an endorsement in itself was calculated to carry much weight with the people of Blankhampton. When a woman talked about the happiness of her newly-married daughter, the words generally conveyed that there was plenty of money and that if Mary or Margaret was not happy she ought to be. But in this instance there was the tall and handsome young husband to show that the bride ought to thank Providence for her fate, and also there was the bride's own happy face and air of assured gaiety and satisfiedness, so Blankhampton accepted Mrs. Trafford's verdict on the marriage without a word of disapproval or even a sniff, and once more the word went round that the little widow in St. Eve's was really a very remarkable woman.

CHAPTER XV.

A LITTLE CLOUD.

"Wisdom is oft-times nearer when we stoop,
Than when we soar."

—WORDSWORTH.

AFTER remaining about a fortnight at Brentwood, Stephen Howard and his wife went back to their London home and almost immediately Mrs. Trafford paid them a short visit on her way to Little Street Hall, where lived the two Miss Stauntons, two old

ladies who were half-aunts to Sir Anthony Staunton and from whom he had great expectations.

Whilst Mrs. Trafford was in Victoria Street, the Bob Markhams came up to Town and put up at the Metropole. "Why couldn't you come to us?" cried Julia, who like all young wives was hospitably anxious to entertain all her friends.

"Oh! no, my dear, many thanks," Mrs. Bob returned. "We are used to an hotel and I am sure you and Stephen are better off without us. Visitors to young married people are a great mistake. No, my dear Mrs. Trafford, you need not look up—I do not mean you. You are a lady and alone—it is different. I daresay I could come and stop a week or so with Julia and she would never know I was in the house, but a married couple are so different. If we are at an hotel Bob can come in and out without consulting anyone, and somehow a man always does want to be bolting in and out of the house like a dog at a fair. He can have all sorts of people coming to see him on business, and really it is surprising what a lot of people he has to see about various improvements at Manor Lodge. And besides these things Bob often wants me to go out and see something or buy something and he would be sure to want to go just when we were going to do something else; so believe me, my dear, it is the best in every way for us to stop at the Metropole."

"Well, perhaps," Julia admitted. "Only don't say that I did not ask you, beg you to come to us."

"My dear, I never will," Mrs. Bob replied smiling.

The following day Mrs. Trafford went off to Little Street and Julia and Stephen were left alone again —after a few more days quite alone, for the Markhams returned to Blankhampton.

They were very happy—a good many people were in Town that they knew, there always seemed to be dinners and other parties going on, every day they became acquainted with more people and Julia set up a "day," when the pretty flat in Victoria Street became quite a centre of attraction. Altogether Julia had a much gayer life than she had ever had before, for Stephen did not seem to care much about sitting quietly at home and if they were not engaged for the evening, generally suggested a theatre. So the neat brougham was frequently in requisition and they did not know what it was to grow tired of one another's society.

"Stephen," said Julia one morning towards the end of January, when he had thrown across the table a letter from Bob Markham giving an enthusiastic description of a glorious run they had had the previous day with the Blankshire Hounds—"I thought you were so passionately fond of hunting."

"So I am," he answered.

"Then when are you going to begin?" she asked.

Stephen Howard settled his arms comfortably on the table and looked at her with a smile. "Well," he answered, "a few months ago I was keen on it, desperately keen on it, but somehow I am perfectly happy where I am—I can hunt a bit next winter."

"And don't you think you will be perfectly happy next winter?" she demanded.

"I think I shall; but I shall have grown more used to being happy,' he replied.

"Stevie," she said suddenly—"Why did Maimie and Bob persist in staying at the Metropole instead of coming here?"

"I think only because they fancied that they would be in the way," he returned. "Why?"

"Oh! for no particular reason," she replied—"only I was rather puzzled by something I heard Maimie say."

"What did she say?" he asked.

"It was not to me—but I heard her tell Bob, and I couldn't help hearing it for I was writing a letter in the boudoir, and Bob said—'Oh! much better not,' and then Maimie said—'Oh! it would not do at all—besides Steve can come to us whenever it is necessary.' I can't think what she meant."

"Nor I," said he. "Oh! I suppose they were only thinking that it is best to leave spoony people alone as much as possible."

"But we're not very spoony," cried Julia.

"But indeed we are," laughed Stephen—"at least I know *I* am."

"But what could she mean about its being necessary for you to go to them?"

He laughed—"Why, my darling, you are getting quite a little inquisitor. But I will explain—you know old Bob and I have a lot of property that is pretty much mixed up one with the other. Well,

often enough, matters have to be arranged between us as to how such and such things shall be sold or kept as the case may be."

"And what sort of property is it?" Julia asked.

"Oh! well, all sorts," he answered—"for instance we have some land out there which were are keeping on because we still hope to find gold on it——"

"But I thought you sold all your property in Australia," she exclaimed.

"My father's property—the estate that we lived on when I was a boy—yes," he answered. "But this is quite a different affair."

"Then supposing that you do find gold," said Julia—"then I suppose we shall be awfully rich."

"We shall be very rich then," he answered.

"And where is it?"

"Well, that is just what we don't know, what we have got to find out," he said.

"No, no, I don't mean the gold, I mean the place," she said, "the gold is in the earth, of course."

"Oh! the property—Well, the exact spot is called Blindman's Drift," he replied—"the Estate is called 'Ballydowne.'"

"And why?"

Stephen Howard burst out laughing. "Why—well, you might as well ask me why I was called Stephen Howard," he cried. "It was called so when Bob and I went in for it as a speculation and we have never troubled to alter it."

"Then does Maimie know about it?"

"Maimie"—looking puzzled. "Why my dear child, Maimie knows every inch of the place."

"I should like to know every inch of the place too," said Julia—"I don't like Maimie to know more about you than I do."

Stephen laughed and caught her hand in his. "My dear little sweetheart, I believe you are a little jealous of Maimie," he cried.

"Very jealous," corrected Julia—"of every one who knows more about your affairs than I do."

He began to look grave. "My darling, my own love," he said—"you must know that there is nothing in all the world that I would willingly keep from you. But there is a difference between keeping back anything of importance and boring you and wasting our precious time by explaining exactly what shares I have got in this, what patch of land I possess here or hold together with Bob or Maimie. You see when my father died, Maimie and I shared alike in everything and as we neither of us wanted to throw a lot of money away by a strict division there and then, we agreed to hold over until the proper time came. In order to help matters Bob insisted upon my being Maimie's trustee, so you see, I am always having to arrange odd bits of business with Bob for her and with her."

"I see," returned Julia thoughtfully.

It was so simple and clear an explanation that she felt she could not say anything more about it. She felt that if she was not satisfied, she ought to be so,

that she would be an unreasonable woman, who did not deserve to have a devoted husband and the income from twenty thousand pounds for her own expenditure without having to render an account of a single penny to anyone in all the world.

And yet Julia was not altogether satisfied. She felt that Stephen carried his business affairs to his sister as naturally as he had always done, she felt that she was being kept in the dark, that in a certain sense, she was the toy, the amusement, the doll, whom he loved and was proud of, and she pined to be what Maimie was, the confidant of his business affairs.

Still she did not like to say anything, she was so sure of his love for her, his pride in her, of his desire to keep nothing from her—only she had that uncomfortable feeling that in spite of his love and his pride, that Maimie came first in his calculations and she came the second. Now no woman in the wide world likes to be second when she feels she ought to be the first and Julia Howard was no exception to the rule. It would have done no good if she had explained as much to Stephen—he would have said and naturally enough, that Maimie understood business, particularly Australian business, while she did not, that he not only did not want to talk over his sister's affairs, finding them quite trouble enough as it was and even if he did it would scarcely be quite honourable to Maimie.

However Julia did not say anything to her husband about this, so he did not make the remarks

which he would inevitably have made had she done so. So this risk to their married happiness passed over without coming near enough to endanger it.

How odd it is that most husbands and wives generally begin their life together in much the same way. The wife's past is to be not only an open book but a sheet of blank paper too. Her husband is to share her most secret thoughts, he is to guide as well as protect her, she is *his* darling, *his* angel, *his* little wife, *his* everything. But on the other hand how different it all is. The man takes a positive pride in *not* having been a sheet of blank paper, and if he opens the book of *his* past life it is generally found not fit for publication! The wife who must share her inmost thoughts with him must not pry too closely into his past, and he will just at first, in the very early days of their marriage, even go so far as to say that he cannot tell her so and so, because it would be a breach of confidence. "It is nothing to do with you," he will say—"it is only a little business matter between my mother and me," or "my sister and me" as the case may be.

It is this phase which is so hard for a new-made wife to bear—but happily it does not last long. In spite of the open book, blank sheet of paper, the guided and protected idea, with which a man starts as a husband, if the wife be ordinarily wise and judicious, in the course of a year there is nothing, I repeat it emphatically *nothing* that the ordinary man will voluntarily keep from her. They say that a woman cannot keep a secret! Well, there may

be something in that but I know that I would rather trust any woman I ever knew sooner than I would trust myself to keep anything from the dear and charming lady whom I call the wife of my bosom. I might try—I might start with a valiant theory that wild horses should not drag it from me. True, wild horses would be as powerless against my stern resolve as unfledged nestlings of an hour old, but I should have to tell Nell all the same. She might be wholly unsuspicious, she might even go so far as not to wish to know—but I should have to tell her all the same.

"What do you say, gentle reader? Very weak of me! Perhaps! But I can tell you this, if you are a man who honours this page with your attention, you are not a married man, if you are of the gentler sex and you are also a married lady, you must have been singularly injudicious in your treatment of "him" or you would recognize the fidelity and truth of the remarks I have just set down.

Oh! you ask why is it so! Faith, that is a difficult question to answer. I do not know — not because I have ever had a quarrel with my spouse, perhaps because I have never had one. Well, well, be that as it may, I have told you how the little cloud no bigger than a man's hand arose on the matrimonial horizon of two lives—for the rest I must ask you to read on.

CHAPTER XVI.

"SUPPOSING——"

"Strange is the heart of man, with its quick, mysterious instincts!
Strange is the life of man, and fatal or fated are moments
Whereupon turn—as on hinges—the gate of the wall adamantine."

—MILES STANDISH.

THE following day the Markhams quite unexpectedly came up to Town again for a couple of days. As Mrs. Bob explained to Julia, Bob had bustled her up to look at a certain set of fittings for one of the Manor Lodge stables, which he could have done just as well without her, and in the evening Stephen and his wife dined at the Metropole with them, having an idea of going on to the Criterion to see Wyndham in "David Garrick" afterwards, that is if seats were to be had. It happened that Stephen was the only one of the four who had seen the piece and the sisters in law were quite eager about it. Stephen, therefore, dropped his wife at the hotel and drove round to the Cri' to find out if there were places to be had, and presently he came back with the news that there was one box left which he had secured.

"That will be lovely," cried Mrs. Bob, who, poor little woman, was quite in ignorance of the little cloud in Julia's mind. "I do like a box so much better than stalls, although perhaps you scarcely see quite so well. But you can go in ten minutes late without annoying a dozen people and the men can go out and what they call 'walk round' between the acts without treading on three or four other women's toes."

"Never go out till after the second act," put in Bob. "Come along Julia, my dear, let us go down to dinner now."

Mrs. Bob laughed—"Bob is quite touchy about walking round," she cried teasingly. "Oh! by-the-bye, Julia, dear, I have just had a letter from Lady Lucifer and they have had the biggest robbery in Blankhampton that they have ever had yet."

"What another?" cried Julia standing stock-still in the corridor.

"My dear," replied Mrs. Bob impressively—"they have got all the Civic plate—the sword and mace, the Mayor and Mayoress's chains of office, they have got her ladyship's diamonds, they have got everything. My dear, it is wicked to laugh at the misfortunes of others, but when I think of the sword and mace I can't help laughing. And when I read Violet Lucifer's letter, I just roared."

"But Maimie," exclaimed Julia in an awed voice —"Where will they stop? Where will they go next?"

"Impossible to say," answered Mrs. Bob—"but

depend upon it the sword and mace have been boiled down long before this and the chains and all the big silver candlesticks too. And what they'll do at the banquets and parties I can't think, for I'm sure there isn't money enough in Blankhampton to buy any new ones."

Julia tried to think—tried to realize what Assize Sunday would be like without the insignia of civic state and dignity to give an air of splendour to the scene, tried and failed.

"Well," she said, as she unfolded her serviette—"I'm very glad *I* don't live in Blankhampton any longer. It did not matter as long as I had nothing to lose but I should be very sorry to lose all the pretty things I have now."

"Of course, you would," Mrs. Bob returned—"I know I felt losing my things badly enough. If you will believe me I keep what I've got left about me night and day, and I sent every silver tea-spoon we had to the bank before we came away. Just as well, for as likely as not they would all have been gone when we got home again."

It was a charming little dinner that they enjoyed that evening, at the comfortable little table in the cosiest corner of the great dining-room, which Bob had reserved for himself and his wife's use during their stay in the hotel. And Julia, when she was made much of by the other three, quite as much of by Bob and his wife as she was by Stephen, began to feel that she was a mean little wretch and nothing less to be giving house-room to such a feeling as had

taken the shape of a little cloud no bigger than a man's hand.

They got somehow during the course of the meal to talking about a great murder-case just then occupying the attention of the newspapers, a case in which a wife who outwardly had all the appearance of devotedly nursing a sick husband only to be confronted by his relatives with a charge of wilful and deceitful murder, of using affectionate solicitude for his welfare as a cloak under which to administer a deadly poison.

"I think she'll get off," said Bob.

"I hope she will," cried Julia—"poor thing, it must be bad enough to lose your husband without being accused of killing him."

"It must be pretty bad to be standing in a dock on a charge of murder whether you happen to have done it or not," put in Stephen thoughtfully.

"Oh! horrible," Julia answered. "We knew a man who was charged with murder, but only at the inquest, you know. And we knew the man who was murdered too. They were both in the Blankshire Regiment."

"Then he didn't do it?" said Stephen. "The man who was had up I mean."

"Oh! no—they were the greatest friends possible. But they never found out who did do it, all the same. I remember Mr. Beresford—he was such a nice fellow; he married Nancy Earle, a great heiress, afterwards—told us when he came back that often enough during the few days that he was in prison,

he used to wonder what it would feel like to be hanged for the murder of his best friend who he would cheerfully give ten years of his life to bring back again."

"And you think he didn't do it," said Stephen.

"I am as sure that he did not as I can be of anything which I have not seen with my own eyes," Julia answered. "And if they had convicted him and hanged him they would still not have convinced me that he did it. I should always have believed in him," she added quite warmly.

"But why?"

"Because I believed in him. He was not capable of murdering anybody, to say nothing of murdering his best friend without the smallest reason for doing so."

"You are a good friend, Juey," said Stephen Howard smiling at her—"and I think I may take it for granted that if ever I am accused of murder—

"Which God forbid," put in Bob Markham with sudden earnestness.

"Thank you, Bob," said Stephen—"but," continuing to his wife—"I may take it for granted that you will believe in me and stick to me."

Julia smiled back at him. "Yes, I think you may," she answered—"I should believe in you whatever might happen to you, whatever you were accused of.'

"That's good hearing," put in Bob, but Stephen Howard said nothing, only looked at his wife with such a world of love and trust in his brave eyes that

instinctively Julia's guilty thoughts sped back to that little cloud and her own drooped before the glory of his in a kind of shame, of which, nevertheless, she was a little proud.

It was Mrs. Bob who broke the silence. "I believe that poor soul will get off, but do you know the hardest part of it all to me is that it is her own sisters who are giving the strongest evidence against her, all the evidence there is, in fact. I never can understand that. I never had a sister, so that I don't know how sisters feel to each other, but I don't think I should go and help to tie the rope round her neck whatever she had done."

"Well, I have a sister," Julia exclaimed, still a little moved by that look of Stephen's—"and I know that if I had actually *seen* her murder somebody, I would still do my best to get her off. I should be sorry, of course, hurt, grieved—but I would not help to hang my own sister. No, I don't think it ought to be expected of anyone. I don't indeed."

"Then you would be wrong," said Bob Markham drily.

"I shouldn't care," persisted Julia promptly.

"But the law would very soon make you care—you would find yourself in the dock too as an accessory after the act."

"I would rather be that than peach on my own sister," Julia said with determination—"and if the law did pounce down on me, every body outside the law would side with me."

"Yes, that is true," put in Mrs. Bob quietly—

"you would be the heroine of the day even if you did get a term of hard labour."

Stephen shuddered. "I don't know if you are aware of it," he said—"but you have got into a most gruesome subject of conversation. I don't know whether Julia has ever been tried for murder either as a principal or as an accessory, but I believe not—of the others I am tolerably sure. And I hope that none of us will ever find ourselves in that distressing situation either with cause or without it. But until that contingency does arise I really do not see that we need harrow ourselves by deciding what we should or should not do."

"And I think that it is time that we went off to the theatre," said Mrs. Bob wisely.

They all got up then and Julia slipped her hand under her husband's arm as they left the table. "Oh! Stevie," she said—"I am so glad you said that—do you know I was getting quite nervous. I began to feel as if I was actually already in the dock. I did really."

Stephen Howard squeezed the little hand within his arm. "Old Bob is a good sort," he said tenderly—"but his idea of humour is very dense—and you might cut his jokes with a knife. Don't let your mind dwell on it, my darling."

"No," she said, "I won't," and then she began to think what a fine fellow her Stevie was and what a lucky girl she had been to meet with him, and then she began to think of that little cloud until she fairly blushed with contrition and shame.

CHAPTER XVII.

HALF EXPLAINED—WHOLLY PUZZLED.

"No action, whether foul or fair,
Is ever done, but it leaves somewhere
A record."—THE GOLDEN LEGEND.

THUS January crept over and February came in, and early in February Julia received an invitation from Marcus Orford's mother, Lady Ceespring, asking her and her husband to spend a few days with them at Orford Place.

"My boy and Madge will be here," Lady Ceespring said in her letter—"indeed they have been here but are now gone on a short visit to Brookfield and will be back early next week. The baby flourishes finely and is a very beautiful person, and what his devoted grandmother feels like when she remembers and altogether fails to realize that she is a grandmother, I cannot find words to express to you."

So at the appointed time Stephen and his wife left London for Leicestershire, and in due course arrived at Orford Place. And at Orford Place from some reason or other the little cloud sprang into life again and grew a little. It all came about

through no real reason and without any legitimate cause, and yet there it was and it was larger and blacker and uglier than when first it had loomed upon their horizon. In the first place Stephen had a letter from Mrs. Bob. It came up with their other letters with the morning tea and Julia without having the smallest idea of wishing to pry into her husband's correspondence, could not help seeing that the letter had an enclosure. Stephen handed her the letter with a careless "there's one from Maimie" but the enclosure he put back into the envelope and the envelope he put aside on the little table beside the bed.

It would have taken a bolder and harder woman than Julia was, to have spoken out plainly and say that she wanted to see the other part of Mrs. Bob's letter. And Julia was neither bold nor hard, she only was very much in love with her husband and wanted him to tell her every thought that came into his mind, to share with her his every care, sorrow, pleasure or joy that had part or parcel in his life. So she read Mrs. Bob's bright pleasant chatty letter without a word of comment and wondered what was in the other part of it and why Stephen had not shown it to her?

She saw him put it carelessly into his pocket presently—with the carelessness which a man always characterises by the word "shove"—evidently it was a matter of but the smallest consequence to him, so she tried to think it was nothing more than some matter of business about which he

supposed she could have neither curiosity nor interest.

In itself this incident might have passed over and Julia have thought no more about it, but the following day, as soon as they had finished lunch and Lady Ceespring asked Stephen if he would care to drive to the nearest town with several of the ladies who were going in to attend a charity bazaar, he excused himself by saying that he would rather not, if Lady Ceespring would mind his remaining at home, as he had several rather urgent business letters to write before post-time.

"Oh! just do as you like," Lady Ceespring said kindly. "This bazaar will not be a very interesting affair, only it is for an excellent charity and they will expect us to stand by them and spend a little money there."

"I will give my wife some money to spend for me," he said quickly. "And Juey, if you happen to see anything very neat in the shape of a pipe-rack you might bring it for me."

"But what do you want it for, Stevie?" she cried —"you have a pipe-rack already."

"I know—but when Bob and Maimie were up last time, Bob admired my pipe-rack immensely and said he must treat himself to one. So if you happen to see a decent-looking one at this bazaar, you may as well secure it."

"Oh! very well," she replied. "There is sure to be one, probably a dozen."

"But don't bring a dozen," he cried in alarm.

He saw them off, standing on the steps of the great entrance to watch them go, and Julia felt quite a little thrill of pride rush through her as she waved her hand in farewell.

"My dear," whispered Madge in her sweet soft tones—"you are a lucky girl—Stephen is delightful"—at which Julia blushed up to the very roots of her hair and found herself smiling into Lady Ceespring's blue seraphic eyes. Lady Ceespring had caught the import of her daughter-in-law's whisper.

"Very charming," she said, with her serene smile.

So Julia went off and spent the ten pounds which her husband had given her for that purpose, and also a little more of her own, because she was so happy. She was lucky too and went back to Orford Place laden with a particularly handsome pipe-rack, a china stand for flowers, two very tolerable needle-work cushions for which she had put into raffles, a framed artist's-proof etching which she had won in the same way and a huge and elaborately-dressed doll which she had won out of a hundred and fifty subscribers.

"Really, Julia," said Madge, as they packed her cousin's belongings away—"you have had all the luck to-day. I have quite ruined myself with raffles and I have got *nothing* to show for my money except a box of burnt almonds I got out of the fish-pond. Have one?"

Julia helped herself out of the small box and held

up the pipe-rack for Mrs. Orford's inspection. "I should think that will be the very thing for Steve," she said.

"Oh! it's lovely," cried Madge, turning it round with genuine admiration—"I should think Stephen will be immensely pleased and Mr. Markham more than pleased."

So in quite a flush of pride Julia looked round for her husband when they got into the hall and, not seeing him there, put down her purchases on the large hall-table and ran up to their room, which was on the same corridor as her cousin's and Lady Ceespring's own suite of apartments.

"Stevie, are you here?" she asked—then saw him sitting at the writing-table in the dressing-room—"Why, Stevie," she cried, "you haven't written a single letter. How awfully lazy of you."

"My dear child," he answered—"I have been writing all the afternoon—the post went out half an hour ago."

"Oh! really," she said—then she sat down on the arm of his chair and slipped her arm about his neck. "Who have you been writing to?" she asked—Oh! yes, yes, yes, my gentle critic, very ungrammatical of her, I know, nevertheless that was exactly what she did say, so I beg you'll not blame me in the matter.

Stephen let his head slip back against her shoulder, and as she was wearing a seal skin coat, a very nice and warm resting-place he found it. "Who have I been writing to?" he repeated. "Well, let me see

—I wrote to Johns the stock-broker and told him to sell out all the Nitrates I have *sharp*—then I wrote to Dickson and told him I would go to a hundred and thirty for that bay horse we saw on Saturday—I sent a cheque to that fool of a tailor who wants one to pay for one's clothes in the street, lest you clear out of the country and make him a bad debt. Then I wrote to Nicholson, the lawyer, about that bill of Warrington's which I think exorbitant, and I sent a cheque to Hervey and Bondwell. I think that was all except a line to Maimie."

"Oh! you wrote to Maimie?" said Julia in a different tone. "Why did you write to her to-day?"

"Why—well really, I don't know. I had finished my other letters and there was no sign of you coming back again, so I wrote to her. Gave her your love and all that."

"Oh! I see," she said coldly.

She got off the edge of the chair and began to unfasten her jacket—Stephen turned in his seat and watched her, as he often did, with all his soul in her eyes; then finding that she was ready to go down he got up and went towards her.

"Give me a kiss before we go down," he said.

"Oh! how silly you are, Stephen," cried Julia pettishly, the remembrance of that letter written and sent off without having been shown to her still sticking in her mind.

"Silly—Stephen!" he exclaimed, for she had never before appeared to find his love-making

irksome to her and she always abbreviated his name into the more tender form of "Stevie"—"Why, Juey—my darling," he cried in a pained tone.

She was softened in a moment and flung her arms round him—"I am horrid—horrid—horrid," she cried with a passionate burst of tears—"A horrid jealous mean little cat. I shall wear your love out, weary you of me, and then I hope I shall die for life won't be worth living any longer."

Stephen was baffled and puzzled by all this, he had not the faintest idea what it meant, not the smallest suspicion of all that was working in his little wife's mind. But he held her in his arms and soothed her and petted her like a hurt child. "My dear—my love—my little wife, don't cry like that," he entreated. "What did I do, dear? What did I say to upset you like this?"

But Julia was now a trifle ashamed—well, if the truth be told, very much ashamed of her outburst, and she gave him no explanation as she rested her head against his broad shoulder. Stephen now, however, was bent upon getting to the bottom of the mystery. "You said you were jealous, just now, darling," he said—"but what are you jealous of—not of me, surely? You didn't think the letters were a blind and that I stayed at home to flirt with one of the other women, did you? Oh! you couldn't," he added laughing at his own suggestion. "You couldn't—it's too ridiculous for words. You didn't think that, did you?"

But Julia still had nothing to say and instead of answering she began to trace imaginary patterns with her fingers in the blotting book which was lying open on the table. Then she began to follow the lines of the work on which he or someone else had been employed and of which traces were left on the blotting paper.

"What have you been doing here, Stevie?" she asked suddenly—"designing a plan for a shooting lodge?"

Stephen Howard pulled the book gently yet forcibly from under her hand and closed it. "I want to know what upset you so, my sweetheart," he asked, and he spoke in the tone of a man who meant to have his question answered.

"Well, Stevie," said Julia contritely—for as usual the cloud seemed to shrink when she was very near to him—"I was tired and—and I am an idiot," she ended ingenuously.

"Yes—yes—but what made you jealous?" he asked, a shade impatiently.

"I think I am always a little jealous of Maimie," she admitted at last, very unwillingly.

"Jealous of Maimie," he echoed incredulously. "Why, I never heard of such a thing in my life—never. If it had been anyone else, I could understand it; but Maimie, my own sister—why, it's preposterous!"

"Yes—but I didn't mean like that at all," Julia cried—

"I should hope not," he rejoined quickly—then

added in the gentlest tone of reproach, "I thought you were so fond of Maimie."

"So I am," Julia cried, "but—but Stevie, I want to be everything to you."

"So you are—everything," he answered.

"You are quite quite sure?" she cried.

"I am quite sure," he replied sturdily.

"*Every*thing," she persisted.

"Everything," he rejoined. "More than all the world beside, no, more than a million worlds if I could have my choice of them all."

Julia sighed, a sigh full of contentment and love—it was delightful to her to be loved like this and she let her head rest against his shoulder again in ineffable bliss and satisfaction. "It is only because I love you so," she said, "that I am so afraid that I am not quite everything to you that I want to be. I am awfully stupid, but I won't be stupid any more—never any more, Stevie."

"Then kiss me," cried Stevie, taking advantage of the situation instantly.

And Julia kissed him willingly enough! Then they went down stairs together, and Julia was the gayest of the gay, and Stephen as he watched her, blessed her in his heart and thanked Heaven fervently that he had seen and wooed and won her for his very own.

"Nor was he careful to hide what he felt. "I don't know whether you noticed it, Marky," said Mrs. Orford to her husband whilst they were dressing for dinner that evening—"but Julia's husband

is perfectly 'gone' upon her, he is awfully in love with her yet. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Yes—wonderful. I think so every time I look at her," answered Marcus Orford, promptly.

"But she is marvellously improved," said she quickly, "don't you think so?"

"Oh! dear yes, she has grown quite pretty," he said with decision.

"And she has grown so gentle and good-natured too," Madge went on. "Before, you know, when we were all girls, Julia used to be a bit touchy at times—but *now*, why she will do anything for you at all. Just now I asked her where she got that pretty frilling she was wearing and she said—'I got it in Regent Street but I forget the number. I'll look it out and write you the name down.'"

Now it happened just about that time that Julia Howard had gone up to her bedroom feeling very happy and restful, and lest she should forget it afterwards she went straight to the writing-table and turned over a little box of finery which was lying there, until she found the little bill which had been enclosed with the frilling which her cousin had so much admired.

"Yes, that is it," she said to herself—"I'll just write the address down and give it to Madge."

As soon done as thought almost, and Julia laid the sheet of paper on which was written the address between the leaves of the blotting-book and smoothed it down with her hand. In doing so she happened to notice that the top leaf of the book

was as nearly as possible unmarked by ink-stains. "Why!" she exclaimed aloud—"that was where Stevie was drawing those little plans—Yes, surely it was."

She turned the leaves of the book over and over —No, there was now not the least trace of those little plans, and there was a distinct trace of a leaf having been torn out.

How very strange—she turned the book over and over—Yes, it was the same, but why had Stephen torn the page out? Perhaps he had been drawing idly on the paper and it was not a blotting mark at all. Anyway it was an odd thing to have done, and Julia folded the paper on which the Regent Street address was written and took it to the dressing-table feeling very much puzzled indeed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DAILY LIFE.

"Blest in the present, look not forth
On ills beyond, but smooth each bitter
With slow calm smile. No suns on earth
Unclouded glitter."

THE letter to Mrs. Bob which had caused Julia Howard to shed the first tears that had come into her eyes since she was married, (with the exception of the night when she had sat and sobbed over *David Garrick*) reached the little lady at Brentwood

in due course the following morning. Bob and she were early people and were already half way through their breakfast when the post-bag came. "One for you," said Bob, handing Stephen's letter across the table—"and this—and this—and this. That's all, Madam."

He often called her Madam in a joking way when they were alone, and Mrs. Bob, who had already opened Stephen's letter and was engrossed by it, held out her hand for the other letters without so much as raising her eyes.

"My, but it must be a fine place," she observed presently—"forty people staying in the house, and Stephen says the gold plate is something gorgeous."

"Whew!" whistled Bob softly.

Mrs. Bob still did not look up. She had taken up the second part of the letter and was examining it closely.

"What's that?" Bob asked.

Mrs. Bob handed him the sheet of paper, on which was sketched a careful little plan, very much the same as Julia had noticed in the blotting book.

"Oh! he has sent it," Bob remarked in a tone of pleased surprise—"that's very good business—just what we want, in fact. How did he find time to do it?"

"Julia and all the ladies have gone off to a bazaar at a place some miles away, so I cried off and am writing letters in my own room. I shall probably

not write again whilst I am here," Mrs. Bob read aloud from Stephen's letter—"but I will tell you everything later on."

"That is all right. Then I had better take care of this," said Bob, folding the sheet of paper and putting it carefully away in his pocket-book. "By the by, what are you going to do to-day?"

"I am going into town," Mrs. Bob replied—"Mrs. Trafford has promised to come out and spend a few days with me."

"All right. Then you won't want me at all?"

"No. What time will you be in to dinner?"

"Eight o'clock. Is anyone coming?"

"Not unless I ask some one to-day," his wife answered.

"Oh! very well. I shall be back in time anyway."

He went out presently in a man's careless and casual kind of way, sauntering into the conservatory and taking a glance at the ferns and flowers with the help of a cigarette, twice went back to the morning room to ask his wife a question of no particular importance, then found his way to the stables and looked keenly and critically over the cattle that were enjoying a life of ease and luxury under the eye of servants and capable grooms, and finally he disappeared from the immediate neighbourhood of the house bent upon business about which Mrs. Bob never thought of making close enquiries.

She and Bob suited one another admirably. On mornings when he came down to breakfast in pink, he was all alert and business-like, had not a moment to lose and could not be "bothered" on any subject whatever. His wife was quite accustoned to his going gaily away, well turned out in every respect and superbly mounted, to turn up again some time before dinner, splashed to the eyes and tired out, as he always said not fit for human society till he had had a warm bath and a quiet half hour on a sofa. On other mornings—off days—Bob Markham led a desultory kind of life until he drifted off towards any kind of business he might happen to have on hand, and Mrs. Bob never thought of interfering with him.

Left to herself Mrs. Bob took up the London paper and looked it over, leaving the table and settling herself comfortably before the fire. Then she went off to talk to the cook about the meals for the rest of the day—then went up to her dressing-room and had a consultation with her maid, who was busily occupied in altering a dinner-dress for her to wear at Matcham the following week.

While she was there the coachman sent up for orders, and Mrs. Bob said that she would have the brougham at three o'clock. So in the ordinary avocations of an English woman of good position Mrs. Bob's morning passed quietly and uneventfully away, and at one o'clock she sat down alone to a tempting little lunch, a bit of fish and a sweetbread, with a glass of good claret to wash it down; and

a few minutes after three o'clock, she might have been seen driving in the neat green brougham picked out with red, in the direction of Blankhampton.

"It is rather early to go back, don't you think, dear?" she said to Mrs. Trafford—oh! yes, they were on the most affectionate terms, these two—"and I wanted to make one or two calls. I wish you would go with me, I detest going to places alone, I always feel such a lost little person, as if somebody might sit upon me by mistake."

"Oh! yes, I will go with pleasure unless it is to anyone I don't know," Mrs. Trafford replied. "We had better call for my things later, hadn't we?"

"Yes, we can do that easily. I want to go to the Deanery and to Rivercliffe. You know the Rivercliffe people, don't you?"

"The Leith-Warminsters—oh yes," Mrs. Trafford replied. "They are rather nice people, don't you think?"

"Yes, I thought so—I called there some time ago but they were away from home. Then Mrs. Leith-Warminster called when we were in Town last time, so I never saw her until one day last week when I met her at the Palace. I thought her a charming woman. Bob says she rides wonderfully well."

"I wonder what made them come to Blankhampton," said Mrs. Trafford thoughtfully.

"Hunting, so she says," answered Mrs. Bob. "Well then, dear, if you are ready we will go—it is

four o'clock now and I want to be back in fair time."

Mrs. Trafford being entirely ready, the two ladies went down to the carriage, each stopping for a moment before the glass in the hall to make sure that her veil was straight and becomingly fixed and that she was in proper trim for the important function of making calls.

The admirable Cox was on the watch and went down the steps before them to open the carriage door, and then Mrs. Trafford got in with a vague little feeling that such a carriage ought to be her own and that, if it was, lady and carriage would admirably match one another.

During her recent visit to Little Street Hall, Mrs. Trafford had had a somewhat different experience of what one may call carriage comfort. The two old ladies, who dispensed lavish hospitality at that large and rambling mansion, had been and still were entertaining an unusually large party at the time that Mrs. Trafford's visit began. It happened that four or five guests were departing by a train leaving Great Street Station (five miles from Little Street Village and Hall) about a quarter of an hour before the arrival of the train which was to bring Mrs. Trafford and three other visitors with presumably two maids and a pile of luggage.

"It will be best to send the omnibus, Lavinia," said Miss Theodosia Staunton to her ten years' junior sister, who was sixty-two and still very skittish for her years.

"Yes—then there will be no crowding," answered Lavinia, who loved gay apparel and always went about herself with several immense dress-baskets.

So the 'bus was sent off and the several visitors were put safely into the train by the careful footman who usually did all that kind of work. But by some unfortunate mischance, the three visitors who were to have come by the same train as Mrs. Trafford did not turn up, having missed it by two minutes, so Mrs. Trafford, who had no maid, was conducted in state to the huge ark, which could I think only have found a rival in all this sea-girt kingdom, in one coach-house, that of John, Lord Bishop of Blankhampton.

Mrs. Trafford felt just what she looked, like a lonely little mouse sitting wistfully in the corner of a huge trap, while on the roof above her one modest trunk danced about like a parched pea on a fire-shovel. No, Mrs. Trafford did not appreciate the grandeur of family arks. She liked the limited luxury of a neat little single brougham by Botwood.

What a very odd thing the study of carriage-comfort is! I begin to doubt whether the possession of horses and carriages is after all a very desirable end to look forward to. Of course in London, except you are a very young man, Shanks's nag will not do very much for you in the way of getting you round socially. If you go out much and you have not a carriage of your own, you must either hire or make cabs suffice for your use. If you cannot afford this you must use the train whenever

you can and become learned in the matter of 'bus-routes. I have tried most ways—and I must say that though I do not know a more uncomfortable way of going to a party, particularly when you have a lady with you, than to turn up the bottom of your trousers or to see your wife tuck up her skirts, and with her evening shoes wrapped in a bit of paper, trudge to the end of the street and scramble into a damp and dirty 'bus strewn with straw and reeking of people and then (if by great good luck you do not have to change 'buses on the way) get out at the other end and trudge to the house which is your destination and the scene of the evening's festivity, and there penetrate through the little crowd of on-lookers and the two or three very superior footmen who are in waiting on their owners within, yet I would rather suffer this to the end of my days, aye and much more, than I would consent to go about in carriage-comfort with a wife who sported the kind of countenance one often sees behind solemn servants and high-stepping horses in the Park or in the principal thoroughfares of London-town.

I wonder why it should so often happen that the smartest carriages contain the most forbidding-looking ladies, women with severe set faces who have an iron air of dignity and seem as if the muscles of their mouths could not relax into a smile if they wanted to smile ever so badly, women who look as if softness and tenderness had no place within their breasts, women whom you cannot fancy have ever been shy timid maidens,

sweet blushing brides, happy wives or proud mothers. They have plenty of pride in their hard, unlovely faces — unlovely and unlovable, although they may be and often are handsome —but it is not that kind of pride, it is the pride of place, the pride of life, not the charming and much to be desired pride of a mother's heart.

There are beautiful and charming women in London by the thousand of course, who look as happy as I hope in Heaven's name they are; they have carriages and fine horses, and many of them are well-born and carry high-sounding titles with them on their way through life. And you see them about here, there and everywhere, it is true. And yet— is it not a fact that if you see one pretty happy face in a smart carriage, you seem to see half a dozen gaunt, scornful, cold, hard, haggard ones immediately after; and have you not, gentle reader, always a tendency to think that the pretty happy face belongs to someone who, to put it plainly, is no better than she should be? What, you think not? Oh! you never thought about it! Well, then, the very next time you find yourself in Piccadilly on a crowded day, just cast your eye over the occupants of the various carriages you see drawn up in deference to the policeman's uplifted finger and decide for yourself whether I am right or wrong.

Well, in due course Mrs. Trafford and Mrs. Bob arrived at the Deanery—it is but a stone's throw from St. Eve's to the stately pile across the Close

Gardens, and they found that dear Lady Margaret was not at home. The two ladies therefore handed in a sheaf of cards and told the coachman to go to Rivercliffe.

"I am not altogether sorry," said Mrs. Bob, as they turned out of the Close gates—"when people are out it does get you through."

"Yes," said Mrs. Trafford, with a laugh.

The lady of Rivercliffe, Mrs. Leith-Warminster, was not out and our friends were ushered in through a very showy hall into a very showy drawing-room.

The lady of the house was not there but she came to them in two minutes, a very tall woman with good black eyes, a nondescript sort of face, with a rather spare long-waisted figure clad in a light gray tailor gown.

"I am so charmed to see you," she said to Mrs. Bob—"and Mrs. Trafford too. How good of you to come—I am a prisoner in the house—Oh! a chill, I feel shivering and rheumatic and Jack thought I had better keep in. Do let me tell them to put the horses up for an hour—yes, do, it will be quite a charity to me."

"We were going to one or two other places," Mrs. Bob answered hesitatingly and looking at Mrs. Trafford.

"Oh! just as you like, my dear, so far as I am concerned," said Mrs. Trafford in answer to the look.

Then they may put up for an hour," Mrs. Bob

said with a laugh—"I dare say my coachman won't be sorry."

So for an hour they remained, and the ladies took their fur wraps off and the three settled down in the sumptuous little oriental boudoir which was just out of the drawing-room. Not quite alone, no, for before they had had half a comfortable chat, as Mrs. Leith-Warminster remarked, two officers of the 43rd came in and presently were followed by another man, who was A.D.C. to the General commanding the district.

"Quite a pleasant little afternoon," said Mrs. Trafford as they drove away from Rivercliffe. "She is a very nice pleasant woman, don't you think?"

"Oh! a charming creature," said Mrs. Bob. "And he is nice too. They must be rich don't you think?"

"Oh! I believe immensely rich. She was a Miss Rice, of Manchester—manufacturing people."

"Ah! yes, I should quite think so," said Mrs. Bob reflectively.

They called at No. 7 for Mrs. Trafford's "things" and then went straight off to Brentwood, only stopping at the big bookseller's in the High Street for Mrs. Bob to get out and select a couple of novels from the circulating library there. But she stopped and had a little chat with a man who was buying some photographs in the outer shop and professed herself very glad to see him.

"Come out and dine with us to-night, Major Vane," she said—"do. Bob will be so pleased to see

you, and we have little Mrs. Trafford staying with us."

"Why thank you, Mrs. Bob," said Major Vane, who was of a very social temperament and would rather at any time dine anywhere than at the mess of the 43rd—"it's awfully kind of you. I'd like it immensely. What time?"

"Eight o'clock," she replied. "Then we shall expect you. Good bye, till then."

He went out to the door with her and saw her into the brougham, staying a moment to speak to Mrs. Trafford ere it drove off.

"I asked him to come out and dine," said Mrs. Bob, as they rolled down the street. "He's a nice fellow, and four is a more comfortable number than three at dinner, don't you think?"

"Yes, I think it is," answered the other.

It was striking six as they turned in at the gates of Brentwood. "We will have a cup of tea," said Mrs. Bob, "I saw that you took none at Rivercliffe, and I did not drink mine. We have lots of time for a real cosy chat before we need think about dressing."

Mrs. Trafford was quite willing and in a few minutes they were comfortably in conclave over a good cup of tea and a plate of hot buttered muffins.

"I have not seen you since you went to stay at Little Street," said Mrs. Bob, as she stirred her tea.

"No—what a long time it seems," answered Mrs. Trafford, thinking of her lonesome journey in the

big omnibus, in which she had felt like some unfortunate soul taking a trip in Black Maria for the benefit of her health.

"Did you have a good time? Did you enjoy your visit?" asked Mrs. Bob, helping herself to muffins.

"Oh! yes, very well. Not so much as if any of my girls had been there."

"No, of course not. Was the house full?"

"Oh! very full—over thirty to dinner every night," Mrs Trafford replied.

"Then it is a large house?"

"A lovely house," Mrs. Trafford replied—"I never saw such black oak anywhere. The oak dining-room is perfectly black and shines like polished ebony. They have rather old-fashioned ways which are very pretty—they dine on the table with slip cloths and really I never saw a prettier sight than the long black table, all set out with pure white flowers, and the most wonderful collection of old silver you ever saw."

"Ah! I think the old ways charming," Mrs. Bob exclaimed. "Of course we are such new people, it would be absurd of us to attempt anything of that kind, but my soul always goes to that kind of palatial luxury—huge halls, long tables, vaulted roofs and all the rest of it. Only, as Bob says, I should be sure to spend all my time in a boudoir you couldn't turn round in, and when I was obliged to be in the big rooms I should shiver till nobody would come within a yard of me; and I dare say I

should," she ended, laughing at this woe-begone picture of herself.

She went on talking about Little Street, however, hearing all about the two old ladies with much interest from Mrs. Trafford—how Miss Theodosia was ten years older than Miss Lavinia, how Miss Lavinia was sixty-two and dressed herself down to thirty-five, how they were Anthony Staunton's aunts and godmothers and had promised to make him their heir, besides having made a handsome settlement on him at the time of his marriage, how their place was managed, what a lavish house they kept, how many servants, how many horses, what lovely pictures and china they possessed, what exquisite oak and Chippendale furniture, what silver and jewels—"Rubies, my dear," said Mrs. Trafford —"rubies enough to make any ordinary woman just green with envy. I always feel glad," she went on, "that though they are co-heiresses, the rubies belong to Miss Theodosia, because she is such a dear sweet little fairy godmother of a woman. You know she has left them all to Anthony in her will—so my Laura will have the finest rubies and sapphires in England."

"Are they so good as that? What a lucky girl," Mrs. Bob cried—then gave a little sigh. "Ah! well, I don't know that there's much luck about ewels. I never got mine back again, you know."

"No—and I am afraid——"

"That I never shall. That is just what I tell Bob," she ended. "Well, I shall not buy any more,

not unless the few I have now are stolen. Bob bought me a new ring in Town the other day and I wash my hands in it because I'm so afraid of losing it."

She held out her hand as she spoke and showed her guest a beautiful Marquise ring, at which Mrs. Trafford uttered quite a scream of delight. "Oh! how lovely. Well, I may be wrong and perhaps if I had ten thousand pounds given me to buy diamonds with, I should be in no hurry to go and spend it. But I *think* I should go straight off and invest every farthing of it in jewelry at once."

"Not if you had had your jewels all stolen," said Mrs. Bob wisely—"that is the sort of experience which helps to develope the bump of caution, my dear. At least, I know it has done so in *my* case."

"Perhaps so. You never heard *any*thing of your jewels, I suppose?"

"Never the smallest trace, nor so far as I have heard have any of the others," Mrs. Bob replied—"and none of us ever will. I think the thieves were the cleverest experts in their line and I'm sure that the police are awful fools in this country, I'm sure of it. And, of course, the one accounts in a measure for the other. No. I shall never see any of them again—I quite gave up all hope of that long ago."

"Well, as I have said a good many times," Mrs. Trafford laughed, "poverty has its advantages. When you have nothing to lose you can't easily lose it, and I go gaily and happily to bed every

night feeling perfectly sure that no thieves will break in and steal, because there is nothing for them to get that is worth having. I must say though that I was horribly nervous all the time that Anthony and Laura were with me last time, because Laura had those exquisite sapphires of hers and persisted in being quite careless about them. Really once or twice I was quite cross with her about them —indeed I went so far as to say more than once that it would serve her right if they were carried off one fine day."

"Oh! my dear, *don't* say that even in joke," Mrs. Bob cried earnestly. "You make me shiver when you suggest anything so dreadful. And, Mrs. Trafford, do you see the time—twenty minutes to eight and a man coming to dinner. I shall dine in a tea gown."

"And so shall I," rejoined Mrs. Trafford.

CHAPTER XIX.

A BUSINESS-SECRET.

"The little that we see
From doubt is never free;
The little that we do
Is but half-nobly true;
With our laborious hiving
What men call treasure and the gods call dross,
Life seems a jest of Fate's contriving."

—COMMEMORATION ODE.

A YEAR had gone by, the happiest year of Julia Howard's whole life. She and Stephen were still utterly and entirely in love with one another and were, as many of their friends said, quite a pattern to young married people in general and those of their own acquaintance in particular.

It is true that her sister and cousin still seemed equally happy, but changes had come to them and they had neither of them been able to set up in quite the same style as Stephen Howard and his wife lived in. And Madge had got another baby, another beautiful person, a little girl, with her mother's soft velvet-like eyes and something of Lady Ceespring's seraphic expression of face, a satin-

skinned person who seemed to enjoy tucking her little pink and dimpled fist into her mouth equally as much as she enjoyed long and strong draughts from a bottle with an India-rubber arrangement at one end and a cork at the top.

And Laura had got a baby too, also a girl, little Theo, a reproduction of her handsome father just softened by the difference of sex. That baby had made a great difference to her father and mother; for the income of a man so very much depends upon the standpoint from which you choose to look at it—and a handsome allowance, with a certain emphasis on the adjective, is one thing when you arrange to settle it on some one else, presumably your heir, and quite another to the heir who looks forward to one day enjoying the reversion of your income and estate to the tune of just as many thousands as you have made your allowance hundreds. Nevertheless Sir Anthony and his wife were inordinately proud of the little Theo and thought and said that such a wonderful child had never been born into the world or, for the matter of that, was ever likely to be born into the world again.

No little voice had come to make a disturbance in the pretty flat in Victoria Street nor did there seem to be any prospect of such a contingency happening. "Such a pity," as Mrs. Trafford said one day to Mrs. Bob Markham.

"Yes, it is and it isn't," Mrs. Bob replied. "In a way it's a great pity—but Stephen and Julia really do seem so devoted to one another and almost as if

they don't care whether they have children or not, and somehow since I lost my baby I feel as if the people who don't have them are better off than those who have them and lose them."

"Yes, yes," answered Mrs. Trafford in a sympathetic tone—"Yes, yes. Well, Julia has never mentioned babies to me and I really don't know whether she cares anything about them or not. She makes a great fuss over her god-child, little Theo—but really she is so wrapped up in Stephen that I think she is perfectly happy as she is."

By this time other radical changes had come about besides the advent of another generation. At last Mrs. Trafford had carried her threats into effect and had turned her back upon the good society of Blankhampton for the wider and more interesting sphere of life in London. Her little *pied-à-terre* had finally resolved itself into a sweet little entresol at the other end of Victoria Street to that in which the Stephen Howards' flat stood. Here she had already established very much the same kind of *salon* for which she had been renowned in the old city where she had had such enormous and satisfactory success in the matter of settling her girls comfortably and suitably in life. That was a phrase which was very often in Mrs. Trafford's mouth. "Yes—I have been very fortunate in my girls," she would say—"for you see they have not only settled comfortably but also very suitably."

Of the old set in Blankhampton there now remained but very few to descant to the present

generation upon the delights of the Society that used to be. Mrs. Trafford after securing three really great marriages for her girls had betaken herself away just when she might have made herself useful to such matrons of her acquaintance as had not made themselves victors in like manner. And Lady Mainwaring who had been waiting so long for the chance of a house in St. Eve's and had secured the reversion of No. 7, was actually so lost to her own interests, poor lady, as to—to quote the words of the good man who cleaned her ladyship's windows—"take ill and die" just while the seven years' agreement of the house was being prepared for signature, thus leaving her nieces Elizabeth and Margaret Damerel with no option but to hie them back to their Cumbrian fastness, where in the seclusion and pride of the county families which sparsely sprinkled the country-side with good society, they looked back as Eve did to Paradise, to the happy days spent in the more mixed sets of Blankhampton.

Then the Antrobuses, who though they have no part in this story were once very prominent folk in the town—they had all left. For Hugh Antrobus, like Lady Mainwaring, died and was gathered to his fathers, Polly and To-To were wooed and married and a,' and then Mrs. Antrobus, who wore very deep and very wide weepers—What, don't you know what weepers are? Well, they form the only redeeming point about widow's weeds in my humble estimation—speedily got the River House off her hands, and with the hen-leggit gawky girl, who was still

known as "Baby," she hied her away to fresh fields and pastures new.

The Dean's beautiful daughter, however, still remained to light the solemn old Parish choir with her lovely face, and Lady Margaret had discarded the well-known seal-skin coat with the flounce of fur at the edge of it, and in its stead had come out in quite a regal garment of black plush with what was shrewdly suspected of being the original flounce divided out—if I do not express myself very clearly on matters of feminine garb, you must forgive me. Pamela Winstanley had got into the thirties now and for three months of the year was still to be seen in the Residence pew, her fair little face held higher than ever in the air, and with a somewhat more sour look upon it than when she had her hour of triumph over Mrs. Lovelace with her bold black eyes and her insatiable passion for admiration. At the Manor Lodge Mrs. Bob now reigned, and a very dainty and charming rule her's was, and the Manor Lodge was far and away the most popular house in the whole neighbourhood of Blankhampton.

They called themselves quiet people and so in a sense they were, but all the same, when they were at home the Manor Lodge was always full and its master and mistress entertained in all manner of ways. But they were not there all the year round and Mrs. Bob had no "day" for her friends and acquaintances to make sure of finding her at home. They too had discovered the necessity of a *pied-à-terre* in Town, and considered themselves very lucky

in having secured a suite of rooms in Queen Elizabeth's Mansions, to which they could go at any moment and be sure of finding everything ready for them, without more trouble than that of sending a telegram to say that they were coming.

In London Mrs. Bob became very soon quite as popular as she had always been in Blankhampton, and being a very intimate friend of Lady Lucifer's, she had the opportunity of knowing very good people.

Mrs. Trafford and Julia Howard also knew if not a better set of people than they had known in Blankhampton, at least a less mixed one, and really the life which Julia led was what Mrs. Trafford described as inordinately gay. "Oh! Julia has no time for babies," she said with a laugh to Mrs. Bob —"it is *quite* as well that she has none."

"Yes, I think it is," returned Mrs. Bob who had always been of that opinion.

Well, as I said before, at this time Julia was very happy. Stephen was all that the most exacting wife could desire, the husband of a year and a half was the lover still, and a very charming and delightful kind of lover too. And yet—why, I wonder is there always a yet?—yet, the little cloud which had troubled Julia so much at the time of her marriage had not vanished, although its character had altered a good deal. She was not jealous of Mrs. Bob now —oh no, that feeling had died out long ago. She had always been fond of her, extremely fond of her, and she had come to the conclusion that she was not

in any sense to be looked upon as a rival. And yet, the cloud was still there and from having the shape of Mrs. Bob, it had grown and changed in character until now it had no palpable form at all, and was indeed nothing but a blurred, shapeless presence, without outlines, without colour, a mere mist with which Julia felt that she was powerless to deal. It was all so odd too, so impalpable, that her very feelings about it were indefinable. One day she would be in the depths of despair, feeling plainly though without apparent cause, that there was a part of Stephen's life into which she was never able to enter, into which he did not intend that she ever should enter. Why she should think this, she hardly knew—and yet she thought at times that she did know. For sometimes she would watch him sitting in an easy chair with his pipe in his mouth buried in thought. "What are you thinking about Stevie?" she had asked many a time, asked it with her arm slipped coaxingly about his neck and her cheek pressed against his. And the answer was always the same—a start and a careless, "Oh! well really, I can't say. I don't think I was thinking about anything in particular."

"You were not thinking about me—wishing you hadn't married me?" she generally cried, and Stephen's answer was always the same.

"Wishing I hadn't married you—my darling!" in such a tone of unutterable reproach that instantly the cloud seemed to melt away as if it was ashamed of itself, and Julia's face and heart grew all sunshine

again and she seemed to love Stephen more and more as the moments went by.

Yet when a few hours had gone by that cloud was sure to come back again—perhaps because Stephen stayed at his club a little longer than usual or because he would write a letter or two and put them into his pocket, evidently with the intention of posting them without having shown them to her.

At last one day she plucked up all her courage, and it was by no small effort I can assure you, and said boldly to her husband, "Stevie—what is that letter you have been writing?"

"Merely a business letter, dearest," he answered.

"Yes, but on what business?" she asked, her heart beating hard and fast at her hardiness and persistence.

"Oh! nothing that would interest you, my darling," he returned carelessly.

"But Stevie, it *does* interest me."

There was a sound of tears in her voice, and indeed they were not very far from her eyes—Stephen turned to her. "Why, my dearest," he cried—"what are you troubling about? It is only a *business* letter, dear."

"But Stevie," she cried piteously, "it is your business that I most want to know about. I shouldn't mind about the rest, but you keep all your business from me and make me feel as if I was a doll, a plaything, a toy, and nothing else. It's not right, Stevie, I am your wife and I have a right

to know all your affairs—I ought to know—I ought to have nothing kept back from me. It is my right to know."

He had started perceptibly at her words urging that being his wife she had a right to know all his affairs, and when she at last stopped literally because she could not trust herself to go on further, he remained silent, looking as if some new difficulty had presented itself before him which he did not quite know how to deal with. At last, however, he spoke.

"You are quite right, Sweetheart," he said slowly and unwillingly, "it *is* your right to know everything that concerns me or that I am mixed up with. Everything affecting my heart you do know already —I am yours absolutely and always. But about my business affairs, well, darling, I tell you everything of which I am free to speak to you. It is true that there is one matter on which I have been silent, *not* because I *wanted* to keep it from you, but simply because I have taken an oath never to disclose this affair to living soul."

"Even your wife?" she cried reproachfully.

"Even my wife," he said firmly—"though mind Juey, if I had been married, or had even seen you when I went into this arrangement, I should never have tied myself, because I hate to have any knowledge which I cannot share with you. But I had never seen you then and although I feel differently now, I am bound to repect my word of honour."

"And it is a business matter?" she asked already somewhat mollified by the explanation and the unmistakable sincerity of his words.

"My dear child, it is a business secret, that is all," he answered. "You know in many businesses they have what is called a trade secret—in one it may be a particular way of making varnish, in another of making a medicine, or a pill or a liqueur. This is neither, but it is imperative that it is treated as a secret and kept as a secret."

"Does Maimie know it?" Julia asked, half ashamed of being ready to pin this new suspicion on to the old grievance.

"Bob knows it, and Bob is bound under exactly the same conditions as I am," Stephen answered—"well, I called it an oath just now, but," with a smile, "that was rather a strong way of putting it. But the fact remains the same, that Bob and I and all the others who are mixed up in the undertaking have given our word of honour not to divulge a word to any living being."

Julia did not speak for a few minutes. "But, Stevie," she said at last in a burst of desperation—"can't you tell me *any*thing about it?"

The intense yearning in her voice touched him. "My dear little love, how I wish I could make you a partner and tell you everything," he cried—"yet I cannot. But I can tell you this—it is a property that we have amongst us—and it is a gold mine."

"A gold mine—and we shall be enormously rich some day?"

"If our hopes are realized—enormously rich."

"And why is there a secret about it?"

"Because nobody suspects that the gold is there to begin with — if they did everybody would be after it and we should have no end of trouble."

"And the secret is the whereabouts of the mine?"

"That is just so—and the means of working it."

Julia thought it over for a few minutes and then she gave a sigh as if she had made up her mind. "Well, Stevie darling," she said, "I'm sorry you can't make me a partner in this wonderful mine, but as you can't why we won't say any more about it, and I won't worry you any more——" and then they kissed one another and Stephen Howard thanked Heaven in his heart that he was to have peace.

Only one more question did Julia ask on the subject just then—"Stevie," she said—"You said that Maimie does not know about this gold mine."

"Well?" he asked.

"Of course she knows as much as I know—that there is such a thing."

"Oh, yes!"

"And she doesn't mind?"

"Doesn't mind—How?"

"Well, she doesn't object to Bob having a secret from her?"

"Oh, no—not a bit in the world."

"And she never worries him to know about it?"

"No, I am sure she does not."

"And Maimie is very fond of Bob," Julia said in a musing tone.

"Maimie is awfully fond of old Bob—always was," Stephen answered promptly.

"But if Bob had any other kind of a secret—not a business-secret," Julia began, and then Stephen caught her meaning and finished the sentence for her.

"Why, Maimie would let him hear of it uncommonly soon," he said with a laugh—"and she would be quite right too. And I hope, my darling, if ever you think that I am keeping a real secret from you—not a business-secret, I mean—that you will let me hear about it too."

"Yes," said Julia, and rested her head against him with a contented little sigh—"Yes, I will let you know."

CHAPTER XX.

A BUNDLE OF NERVES.

"What women would do if they could not cry, nobody knows! What poor defenceless creatures they would be."

—Douglas Jerrold.

Just about this time another great robbery took place, and a really awful affair it was. For Little Street Hall, the abode of the two Misses Staunton was broken into and rifled of almost every moveable valuable that it contained.

The facts were these! After the brilliant house-party of which Mrs. Trafford had formed one, a year previous to the time of which I am speaking, the old ladies had not been at Little Street Hall for any length of time. For Miss Lavinia, feeling herself to be a very personable middle-aged lady still, took it into her head that she must have a season in Town.

In vain did Miss Theodosia try to get out of it. Miss Lavinia had made up her mind to go, and when Miss Lavinia was pleased to make up her mind to wander thither did Miss Theodosia, moved by the habit of sixty years of giving in to her beauty-sister, invariably follow. As I said the older lady tried her best to get out of it, urging that at seventy and odd years it is desirable to lead a quiet life and that the rackettings and junkettings of a London season were about calculated to make her shuffle off this mortal coil altogether. But it was all in vain; Miss Lavinia had made up her mind, therefore Miss Theodosia had little or no choice other than to gracefully resign herself to the inevitable, only bargaining for a house in Queen's Gate or failing that in the Exhibition Road or immediately out of it.

"My dear Lavinia, I would rather be there than anywhere—I can breathe there—I cannot breathe in Mayfair, so I must beg that you will be kind enough to do as I wish. I prefer Queen's Gate or somewhere very near to it where I can have a decent sized bedroom and a fairly good staircase. And I

wish the horses to have good new well-ventilated stables so that they will not feel *much* difference from their own."

Therefore the beginning of April saw the two old ladies safely settled in a handsomely furnished house in Queen's Gate, at the end nearest the Park; and from that time until the middle of July they went in for a life of dissipation such as was really dreadful to think of. They were rich and well-born and always beautifully dressed, and Miss Theodosia displayed "the finest rubies in Europe" at so many dinner-parties that her digestion was quite ruined. Oh! pardon me, gentle reader, what do you please to say? That a little while back I described Miss Theodosia's rubies as the finest in England. Scarcely, but Mrs. Trafford did so—and that was in Blankhampton. At all times we must make allowances for Metropolitan hyperbole. It is always so! In London if a woman is fat, she as a matter of course is always called handsome—if she is tall and slender, she is called pretty—if she is tall and finely made they say she looks beautiful. If she is a somebody, and is really too hideous for words, the paragraphists make a point either of saying that she is very *chic* or else that her fine face was well set off by such and such a bonnet.

As an instance there is a lady in London now who burst upon the world in the character of a very rich woman and two seasons ago she was called "Madame Crœsus" by half the society papers in Town. Last season she received brevet-rank and was promoted to

"Princess Crœsus." But if you will believe me before those few months were over she was blazoned forth as "*Queen* Crœsus,"—after which, as it seems in my poor judgment, there remains nothing for these dear people to do now but to call the lady "The Golden Calf" outright. Yes, it will be carrying personal journalism a little far—however, as an imaginative writer, I offer them the poor suggestion for what it is worth.

Well, it was much the same with Miss Theodosia's beautiful rubies. Sure, they were gems of great value, pearls of great price. Miss Theodosia was inclined to stoutness, was very fair still, dressed well and did not hide her neck, and the great wells of blood red light became the object of much comment. And as they became known they also advanced in value, and passed from the perhaps somewhat extravagant description of the finest rubies in England to the most valuable rubies in Europe. And why not? When you go in for display—why not as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb? Doubtless had Miss Theodosia gone to London the following season her rubies would have been reckoned still higher and all the world would have been challenged to outshine them. As it was, however, circumstances intervened! And in this way! To be quite frank the celebrated rubies received so many invitations to dinner, that by the middle of July their owner's digestion had gone to pieces and the two old ladies were peremptorily packed off to a German *Bad*, to be followed by six weeks in the Engadine, a sojourn

by the Italian lakes and a winter at Monte Carlo and the adjacent towns.

Meanwhile the rubies were locked up for the benefit of their health in the strong room of the bank where the sisters kept their valuables, and did not see the light again until they were sent to be cleaned in February, when the sisters returned to Little Street to entertain the usual party of that month. And the day after they were sent down, the rubies went, aye and practically every thing else of value in the house went also.

And then what a weeping and a wailing there was! How Miss Lavinia shivered and shuddered as she went up the wide old ghostly stairs and insisted upon two of the men servants sleeping in a room on the other side of the corridor, and that her maid should sleep in her dressing-room; how she upbraided Miss Theodosia for her cruel heartlessness in giving all her thoughts to the jewels, when she was frightened nearly out of her seven senses—at which Miss Theodosia retorted sharply that she could not possibly be frightened out of what she hadn't got, a remark which Miss Lavinia took as personal and resented accordingly, going indeed so far as to suggest intentional insult on her sister's part.

Nor would Miss Lavinia listen to reason on the point—in vain did Miss Theodosia explain that as Miss Lavinia was not abnormally constituted in her body, she could only have the five senses with which weak humanity is ordinarily endowed, in vain

did she beg her sister to believe that she, Theodosia, had referred only to the *number* of senses of which she had spoken and not in any way to the quality of them—yes, all in vain—Miss Lavinia tossed her head and put her nose high in air and made withering remarks at the wall above Miss Theodosia's devoted head, and then she finished her protest and clinched the matter by going off into a wild fit of violent and protracted hysterics, so violent and so protracted that poor Miss Theodosia sent off post-haste for the doctor who lived five miles away, while Phœbe the under-maid, (who had never quite forgiven Miss Lavinia for once stopping a very pleasant trip which was in view for a few weeks' sojourn in Warnecliffe Barracks,) deliberately slid a heavy and exceedingly chilly key a-down her mistress's back and took advantage of the gasp with which she realised the strange substance to hold a large toilet jar of the strongest lump ammonia under her nose greatly to the poor victim's inconvenience and distress. But it cured the hysterics, and when the doctor in due course arrived, Miss Lavinia was well enough to be ordered to bed "to be kept exceedingly quiet" and Miss Theodosia had time to think about the loss of the exquisite gold plate which had been their pride for many a day, and to mourn plaintively over the loss of her beautiful rubies.

"The finest rubies in Europe, doctor," she said when she had told the sad story to the cheery man of medicine—"I knew, of course, always that they

were very very valuable for Streeter in Bond Street told me more than once that he hoped I would give him the chance of them if ever I wanted to sell them. They were my mother's, *not* Staunton jewels, and they passed to me and I had them re-set when I came of age. I was so proud of my rubies; and Streeter said they were very valuable, but still I didn't know till last Season that they were worth quite so much—'The finest rubies in Europe' all the papers said. I used to wonder that papers had never noticed them before, but they never did somehow; you see things are different now-a-days—the papers seem to take so much more interest in such things than they used to do."

"Oh! you'll get them back again—rubies are difficult things to dispose of," said the doctor cheerily.

"Never, Doctor," said Miss Theodosia. "I shall never set eyes on them again—excepting perhaps in a different setting when I shouldn't know them again. And I'm the more vexed because I had promised to leave them to my nephew Sir Anthony, and only the last time they were here I said in a joke to her, poor thing, that some day she would be able to boast that she had the finest rubies and sapphires in England. For the Staunton jewels are sapphires—yes, sapphires."

"And I hope her ladyship will be able to wear both," said the doctor gallantly—"I hope so with all my heart, with all my heart."

"Thank-you, Doctor," replied Miss Theodosia with

appropriate tone and gesture, much as she might have returned thanks for sympathy expressed for her in a heavy bereavement, "thanks, you are very kind, very kind. And my sister, doctor, what do you think of her?" she asked anxiously.

The doctor made a comprehensive gesture with his out-spread fingers—"Oh!—Miss Lavinia is a little over-wrought, upset naturally by all this——"

"Oh no, it was not this that upset her at all," replied Miss Theodosia, who was afflicted with an insatiable desire for absolute truthfulness—"You see they are *my* rubies that are gone—my sister's diamonds are in Town being re-set—so absurd, as I told her, to have diamonds re-set at our time of life—and with her the gold plate is really a very secondary consideration. But she was very nervous, fancied that burglars would get in and—and—well, and steal her, I think; said she would have all the men-servants to sleep up in the guest rooms and that I was perfectly cold-blooded to be thinking about my rubies when she was frightened out of her seven senses, and then just because I told her she couldn't possibly be frightened out of what she hadn't got, she took it as a personal matter and went into hysterics over it."

"Well, but I dare say Miss Lavinia would not have gone into hysterics over the same remark at any other time," said the doctor soothingly. "And, as is generally the case after hysteria, she is now very weak and prostrate and must be kept perfectly quiet for to-night. I have told Warner that I will

send over a composing draught, and in the morning I have no doubt that she will be better."

And when the morning came Miss Lavinia was better, decidedly better, but wore the interesting air of an invalid just dashed with martyrdom. She got out of her bed late in the afternoon and appeared in the drawing-room in a very becoming black moirè tea-gown with a good deal of rose-coloured silk and creamy old lace about it.

There was quite a crowd of visitors, the news having spread round the county and many of their friends had driven over to enquire into the truth of the rumour and offer their condolences to the sisters on their irretrievable loss. It was positively startling to Miss Theodosia to see the way in which matters arranged themselves. *She* had lost her rubies but it was the frail bundle of hysteria and nerves in the elaborate black and rose tea-gown who complacently received all the pity and the sympathy, and at that point, that is when the idea fairly dawned upon the old lady's mind, it is safe to say that Miss Theodosia would dearly like to have shaken her sister. Indeed I believe if circumstances had permitted of such a process being put into operation, the shaking would have been so sound and so thoroughly administered that Miss Lavinia Staunton would never have had the nerve to indulge in a fit of hysterics again as long as ever she lived! What a pity it is that oftentimes politeness steps in and puts a stop to measures of the most salutary and beneficial description.

But then in the kind of society in which Miss Theodosia and Miss Lavinia Staunton moved, such forcible proceedings are not practicable and so Miss Lavinia continued in the character of an interesting invalid, and by the aid of her tea-gown, her fan, her gold-topped smelling bottle with the monogram L. S. set in diamonds on the top of it, of carefully lowered blinds and rose-shaded lamps, contrived to extract for herself all the sympathy which should rightly have been bestowed upon the owner and loser of "the finest rubies in Europe."

CHAPTER XXI.

WHAT WARNER HEARD.

"When a woman has the gift of silence, she possesses a quality above the vulgar; it is a gift Heaven seldom bestows."

—CORNEILLE.

I THINK on the whole the two old ladies contrived to stir up the neighbourhood round about Little Street Hall very effectually on the subject of their misfortune; in fact they made much more real fuss than any of the people in the Blankhampton neighbourhood who had been relieved of their property in a like manner had done.

Their nephew, Sir Anthony, had already enjoyed and terminated his long leave but on the strength of the finest rubies in Europe he contrived to get an extra fortnight's leave and promptly came along

to Little Street, accompanied by Laura and the blessed baby, to give his aunts the benefit of his advice and to help to support them in their misfortune.

Then the other and previously expected guests began to arrive, and gradually the house filled, and also by hook or by crook they had to put up quite a staff of keen-faced gentlemen hailing fron Scotland Yard, or wherever the Criminal investigation people happen to have their headquarters.

But at the same time they found out nothing, absolutely nothing; there was no trace whatever, not a footmark, not a tool, not a sign of any kind except that the plate and jewels were gone.

And gradually the excitement subsided a little and the house-party at Little Street began to enjoy life somewhat, and at the end of ten days, Sir Anthony—finding that his presence was actually of no use whatever to his aunts and that the cleverest detectives in England were at their wits' end for a clue, and guessing from one or two gentle little hints which were dropped by Miss Theodosia that guests were already invited to fill the rooms at present in the occupation of himself, his wife and the blessed baby—told his aunts that he was awfully sorry he hadn't been able to be of more use to them, but really the affair seemed to be beyond all comprehension, and as his leave was nearly up, he and the wife would be off in the morning as they wanted to stop a couple of days with Julia Howard on their way home.

Miss Theodosia gave quite a sigh of relief. "Of course, my dear boy," she said, "I am always sorry when you have to leave us; but the fact is, this time I shall really be quite relieved. You see you told me positively that you could not possibly get even a single day's leave during February——"

"Couldn't have done under ordinary circumstances," Sir Anthony put in.

"No, no, exactly. But the fact is I have asked as many people as the house would hold and——"

"You will be more glad of our room than our company," cried Sir Anthony with a laugh.

"Oh! no, not that," exclaimed Miss Theodosia in a tone of horror.

"Well, pretty much that," Sir Anthony laughed. "But never mind, Aunt Theodosia, we're not the least offended. I only wish I could have made myself more useful over this business."

So they went up to London and Julia met them at the station with her neat brougham and carried Laura off to Victoria Street, leaving Sir Anthony to put the nurse and the blessed baby and all the luggage in and on to a four-wheeled cab and himself get into a hansom and drive down to his club for an hour or so before dinner.

The sisters naturally enough talked about little or nothing but the robbery at Little Street.

"My dear," said Julia fearfully, when they were comfortably settled before the fire in the little boudoir—"I assure you I bless the kind Providence every day which permits me to live in a flat—No, it

it is not easy to rob a flat excepting it is on a ground floor."

"Well, I shouldn't mind having your flat in any case," cried Laura, looking round the elegant little room.

Julia looked round too and then caught the glance of her husband's eyes. "No," she said turning back to her sister, after smiling at Stephen —"I daresay not. It is pretty, isn't it? By the by, Little Street is a fine place, is it not?"

"Oh! a lovely place," Laura replied. "But really all the same, I do not wonder that they got the burglars in. The display they make is really ridiculous, and all to please that silly Miss Lavinia, who really does make the most awful fool of herself you can possibly imagine."

"Well, if she was anything like what she was in Town last season, I can imagine it very well," said Julia with a laugh—"she was silly enough then."

"My dear," said Laura impressively, "she was *rational* compared with what she is now, I assure you that the whole of the time we were there—ten days—she was doing the invalid, talked about her shattered nerves and screamed every time a cinder fell out of the fire. And the beauty of it all is that *her* jewels are safe in Bond Street and her sister has lost everything she has."

"I can quite believe it," said Julia—"I always thought her the silliest woman I ever knew, but I've noticed that she generally contrived to get the easiest chair and the biggest peach, and the most

comfortable seat in a carriage for herself, so that really, I think her silliness is all put on more or less."

"Of course it is. But it puzzles me to know why she should make such a fuss about this affair. If ever Miss Theodosia mentioned the robbery, she would shudder and shut her eyes and begin to faint —'Pray, spare me, Theodosia,' she would say and poor old Miss Theodosia, who was *aching* to talk about the finest rubies in Europe and burning to discuss every little detail concerning them, always had to bottle her words up and turn the conversation to ward off the threatened fit of hysterics. I told Miss Theodosia once that if I were her I should just let her go off into hysterics and stop in them as long as ever she liked."

"And what did Miss Theodosia say?" asked Stephen in great amusement.

"'Oh! my dear,' she said," Laura answered, "'*don't* let Lavinia hear you say that. She is quite capable of leaving the whole of her fortune to that detestable Emily Spenderley's hateful boy—and if I ever thought that horrid boy would be master of this house, I am sure I could not rest in my grave—I believe I should come back and haunt the place.' It's a beautiful old place," Laura went on—"and the gold plate was a dream. I daresay it was all melted down within a few hours of its disappearance."

"Oh! I should think so," Julia agreed—then after a moment's pause she said reflectively—"Dear

me, what a lot of people we know who have lost their plate and jewels in the same way. I wonder if it's the same gang who did all the others."

"Very improbable," put in Stephen carelessly.

"Yes, I suppose so," answered Laura. "But, do you know, it puzzles me and worries me to guess why Miss Lavinia always wanted to drop the subject —and she did."

"Oh! no, you must have fancied it."

"No, I didn't, for I told Anthony and he thinks the same thing. I can't make it out *now*," Laura continued in a determined tone, "but I shall never rest till I have made it out. Oh! you may laugh as much as you like," she added to Stephen, "but all the same I mean what I say."

Stephen Howard went off into a fit of laughter.

"Well," he said at last when he could command himself sufficiently to speak—"I sometimes think Juey goes in for propounding the funniest ideas in all the world; but in her wildest flights of imagination she has never equalled your suggestion. Surely, you don't mean to say that the old lady is mixed up with the robbery in any way, or that she has actually stolen the things herself?"

"No, I don't," answered Laura stoutly—"but I do think this, that Miss Lavinia is a thoroughly sharp and clever old lady who *chooses* to wear a mask of utter silliness which she calls nerves just to make herself look interesting and coquettish; and I think she knows more about this particular affair than she cares to tell."

"But how could she know anything about it if she was not implicated in the matter herself?" Stephen exclaimed.

"Very easily," said Laura quickly—"for instance, the robbery took place that particular evening about ten o'clock, or rather about ten o'clock the night after they got back to Little Street the robbery was discovered by Warner, who is upper lady's maid to the two old ladies. Miss Lavinia had gone up to her room for something immediately after dinner, that is about a quarter past nine. She stayed upstairs about twenty minutes, went quietly into the little drawing-room and sat down in a chair without speaking and in fact covered her eyes with her hand, a most unusual thing with her. About ten o'clock, or a few minutes past, Warner went up from the upper servants' supper which begins at nine punctually and, finding that someone had been in the room and that the jewel-case was gone, she uttered an awful scream and ran down to the drawing-room.

"'Dear me, Warner,' said Miss Theodosia who was quietly reading a book—'What is the matter that you come rushing in in this manner? Have you taken leave of your senses?'

"'Oh! Ma'am, Miss Staunton,' cried Warner, sobbing with fright—'there have been thieves and robbers in the house and your rubies—they're gone, Ma'am, gone.'

"'Oh! my God!' cried Miss Lavinia in a sharp voice and then with a great groan sank back fainting into her chair."

"Well, it seems to me," remarked Stephen, when his sister-in-law had got to this stage—"that all this was natural enough and, in fact, was precisely what almost any woman would have done under similar circumstances."

"Yes—yes," answered Laura—"but hear the rest. She was in a genuine faint for a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes. Oh yes, she can do a sham one as cleverly as anyone I know, I've seen her many a time, particularly since the robbery took place—and Miss Theodosia in her fright and anxiety went up to her room to fetch some special medicine which she had put away for use on such occasions. Whilst she was gone, Miss Lavinia opened her eyes a little and her lips moved. Warner bent over her and heard her say—'Oh! Frank, Frank, that you should have come to this—Oh! my God, it will break my heart,' and then she slipped off into another swoon and when Miss Theodosia came back with the restorative she came to and straightway went off into violent hysterics. After that she has always steadily refused to listen to any discussion of the affair, upbraids her sister for any conversation which arises about it, says she has no heart and thinks more of her rubies than of her only sister and has generally made herself very disagreeable about it ever since."

"Well?" said Julia eagerly.

"Well, I know what I think about it," said Lady Staunton significantly.

"And what do you think?" cried Julia and Stephen in the same breath.

"I think that she went up accidentally to her room and surprised the thief at his work—and I think that she recognized him."

"Then why didn't Staunton ask her about it?"

"Anthony did broach the subject, but the result was such a much worse fit of hysterics than she had ever indulged in before that Anthony was glad to have done with the subject and Miss Theodosia begged him for Heaven's sake never to mention the robbery to her sister again. And of course you know"—Lady Staunton went on—"Anthony has to be very careful what he says to her, for they have six thousand a year each and if he offends her she will think nothing of, as Aunt Theodosia often says,—'leaving the whole of it to that detestable Emily Spenderley's hateful boy.' And of course Anthony does not exactly wish that to happen, so that he cannot follow up this robbery as he would like to do. But at the same time we think that Miss Lavinia knows a good deal more than she pretends to do and that if she chose to speak, she could give the clue which the police want."

"It seems incredible," Julia cried.

"Not at all," said Stephen—"I think Laura has just hit the right nail on the head. But how do you know the police have not got hold of this clue also?"

"Because Warner has told *nobody* but Anthony and me. And Warner will not say a word—Miss Lavinia gave her ten pounds the other day, because

her nervousness had given her so much extra trouble —and Warner has been about thirty years with them, and she and Miss Lavinia understand one another thoroughly."

"And because of some sickly sentimentality on a foolish old woman's part, you will lose your chance of ever wearing the 'finest rubies in Europe,'" cried Mrs. Stephen in unutterable disgust.

"That is pretty much how the case lies," returned Lady Staunton. "And we can do very little to help ourselves although both Anthony and I are agreed that if we could make her speak we could put our finger on the thief at once. As it is, however, Anthony does not think the rubies and gold plate worth risking six thousand a year for. Miss Theodosia quails before the dreadful hysterics and the bitter reproaches which her sister hurls at her on the smallest provocation, while Warner, who knows the value of a good and lucrative place, does not see what she would gain by opening her mouth so she very wisely keeps it shut. And I must say *I* think that I should do the same if I were in her place."

"And I dare say I should too," said Julia, but all the same she gave a sigh to the memory of the exquisite jewels of which she had more than once already envied her sister the probable possession. "Well, Laurie," she added, after a moment, "I am awfully sorry for your disappointment, dear, for it must be a disappointment to see such jewels as those slip out of your grasp. And I do hope that

you will take care to have your sapphires in safe keeping."

"Yes," Laura answered—"I will take care of them I promise you."

CHAPTER XXIII.

FRANK!

"There is nothing makes a man suspect much, more than to know little; therefore remedy suspicion by procuring to know more; and keep not your suspicions to smother."—BACON.

EVERYBODY said afterwards that the great robbery at Little Street Hall was the means of killing Miss Lavinia Staunton. From that exciting and eventful evening it is certain that the old lady never looked up again. She remained in a state of tea-gowns and nerves, refused to go out, insisted upon a couple of the men-servants sleeping in the next room to hers, had her bedroom windows barred till they looked like a prison or a madhouse, and gradually slipped into the position of a great invalid. In her presence all mention of the robbery became a strictly tabooed subject; and at last, just before Easter, Miss Lavinia by some means or other caught a severe chill and, after four or five days of severe illness, she died and the secret of the jewel-robbery was safe for ever.

Miss Theodosia felt the loss terribly, and by the advice of the doctors as soon as the funeral was over, she left the Hall and went to the South Coast for a thorough change. With her also went the

faithful Warner and a young person of more frivolous mind who had replaced Phœbe.

The place they chose was in the Isle of Wight. They were lucky enough to find a large well-furnished house standing in its own grounds. Miss Theodosia's own carriage and horses were sent over, her own cook went to cook for her, her own butler and footman to wait upon her, and yet, when the old lady got there, she felt more dull and lonely and miserable than she had done at home.

"I am so lost without my sister, doctor," she said to the local medical man, whom Warner called in in a fright one day—"we had really never been parted, and although she was ten years younger than me and thought herself young enough to be my daughter, we were always together and the closest of companions. And without her I feel as if I had lost myself—and so I have, my other self," and then poor Miss Theodosia began to cry weakly and Warner put in her word.

"My ladies always lived a very gay life, Sir," she said with a modest cough. "Miss Lavinia—for whom Miss Staunton is wearing mourning now, Sir—was very fond of gaiety and going out. And I feel sure Miss Staunton misses the visitors more than anything. I have been in their service thirty years, and I never knew them be a week without visitors during all that time. And now my poor mistress is all alone in a strange house and she feels it dreadfully."

"But, my dear lady," said the doctor, "why

don't you have a few people to stay with you and cheer you up a little?"

"It is such a short time since my loss," answered Miss Theodosia, drying her eyes.

"Well, every day will mend that," the doctor said cheerily. "Supposing you only ask one or two just at first."

"I don't know anyone who would care to come," sighed Miss Theodosia wretchedly.

"Oh, Ma'am," cried Warner, "I am sure Mrs. Trafford would be only too glad to come and pay you a visit—my Lady's mother, Sir," she explained to the doctor. "You know Ma'am, you said Mrs. Trafford wrote you the sweetest letter of anybody when poor Miss Lavinia went, and she sent a lovely wreath with affectionate remembrances on it."

"Yes, Warner, so she did," said Miss Theodosia with another sigh. "Yes, she was very tender and kind. I think I might without impropriety ask her to come and spend a few weeks with me. It will be dull for her, but there are lovely drives and I have the carriage and horses here."

"I dare say she will enjoy it immensely," said the doctor. "Is she a cheerful lady?"

"Oh, most cheerful," cried Miss Theodosia in quite a sprightly tone, so much did the prospect cheer her of having somebody beside Warner to talk to.

So that very afternoon poor Miss Theodosia sat down and wrote a long letter to Mrs. Trafford, giving her a detailed account of her new abode, of

her great loneliness and of how the doctor had recommended cheerful society as her best medicine. "And," she ended, "now I am going to ask you, dear Mrs. Trafford, to do me a great favour and come and spend a few weeks with me in this lovely island. I know it is a great favour to ask you to leave London just at this time and shut yourself up in a house of mourning but, indeed, I shall be so grateful to you and I shall do everything that is consistent with respect for my sister's memory to make your visit as little dull as possible. I have the principal servants and the carriage and horses here so that you will be comfortable enough," and then there followed some further explanatory matter and the letter ended "Yours affectionately, Theodosia Staunton."

Now as a matter of fact Mrs. Trafford had, up to the time of receiving that letter, had no intention whatever of leaving London until the end of July. But as soon as she got Miss Theodosia's letter—which was at breakfast time—she put on her bonnet and went down the street to see Julia.

"Rather a nuisance for you," was Julia's remark, when she had read the letter.

"Yes, that is so—but for Laura's sake I think I ought to go," Mrs. Trafford replied.

"Yes—it is no slight thing for Laura to have twelve thousand a year hanging in the balance," Julia said gravely.

"Oh! I must go," Mrs. Trafford said decidedly, "I really have next to no choice in the matter.

Well, I think I shall let my flat, it is just the best time of the year for that. If I come back before it is free again I can go to an hotel."

"Or you can come to us," said Julia promptly.

Now if she was anything, Mrs. Trafford was a woman of action, and she did not then let the grass grow under her feet. She called a cab and trotted off to a house-agent, and within a couple of days she had let her sweet little flat for the rest of the season at a rental of nine guineas a week, which, all things considered, was not bad business! Mrs. Trafford did not often do bad business! Then she packed up her things and set her house in order and finally found herself in the train on the way to the Isle of Wight.

Miss Theodosia's first words to her were of heartfelt gratitude for her unselfishness in giving up the best part of a London season to come to a house of mourning where she could not in the ordinary run of events possibly have gaiety of any kind. Mrs. Trafford was very gentle and tender with the old lady and lightly put aside the question of her unselfishness, her mind flying straight to the thought that she was really doing this for Laura and to ensure her the twelve thousand a year which the old lady had to leave, while poor grateful Miss Theodosia never gave them a thought at all and innocently and really believed in the unadulterated goodness of Mrs. Trafford's heart.

And in truth Mrs. Trafford found it dreadfully dull at Boscombe, as the pretty house was called

There is a certain satisfaction in some minds, usually feminine in gender, when they are trying something new, living in a new house, starting a new custom, doing in fact *any*thing out of the common, or what to them is out of the common. In their minds there is such a delightful sense of newness that is almost invariably accompanied by the air which a child has when it is playing at keeping house, or playing at being grown up. Now just at first when Mrs. Trafford took up her abode at Boscombe, she went with a little jaunty air, she explored both the house itself and the pretty grounds which surrounded it, then went further a-field and from Miss Theodosia's roomy and comfortable victoria, she viewed all the scenery of the beautiful little island in which she found herself. But this sort of exhilaration does not last for ever, and by the end of about a month Mrs. Trafford began to feel very unmistakably bored.

Miss Theodosia was not exactly conscious of this, but she had from the first felt that it was a very great kindness of Mrs. Trafford to come during the pleasantest time of the year to a house of mourning, and as the weeks crept slowly over she felt that her visitor must be pining for another face beside her sad one. As a matter of fact Miss Theodosia had not a particularly sad face at this time; she *thought* that she had, she truly and conscientiously believed that the depth of her grief for Lavinia equalled the depth of the crape flounces on her gown, but in reality such was not the case.

During the whole of her life Miss Lavinia had been more or less of a trial to her sensible elder sister, of late she had been the cause of considerable anxiety also, for there was very little silliness of which Miss Lavinia was not capable and she had had in later years but very little care for the dignity of her old name and none at all for the dignity of her old self. So on the whole the relief to Miss Theodosia's really well-organized mind was a great deal more than she was herself aware of as yet. Still it must be acknowledged that Mrs. Trafford, who was a little woman of an extremely sociable nature, did pine for the sight of a fresh face or two, so that when she had been at Boscombe close upon a month, and Miss Theodosia suggested for about the twentieth time that she felt sure she was dreadfully bored and that really they might ask somebody else now, she accepted the new idea with alacrity.

"You must be getting tired of me, dear Miss Theodosia," she said sweetly. "Supposing that you ask some other friend down and I will make way for her."

"Oh! I did not mean that at all," cried Miss Theodosia looking at Mrs. Trafford with wide open eyes of alarm. "You don't want to desert me —oh! pray don't dear. You just suit me and you are so kind and bright and sympathetic— pray don't talk of leaving me to my loneliness— *don't!*"

"Oh! my dear, I shouldn't think of leaving

while it is any comfort to you to have me stay," exclaimed Mrs. Trafford, visions of that twelve thousand a year floating before her mind. "But I did not want you to be getting weary of seeing me here. You meant then to ask some one else whilst I am still here?"

"Yes, precisely so," replied Miss Theodosia meekly. "You see, dear, this is just the best month of the year for the island, and I don't think there would be any impropriety in my having a few visitors now. I thought we might ask Mr. and Mrs. Stephen down. Do you think they would come?"

"I should think they would be delighted," answered Mrs. Trafford promptly, though as a matter of fact she was by no means sure that either Stephen or his wife would care to leave London just then. "But at all events it will be very kind if you ask them, though of course, *I* cannot answer for their being able to come."

Later in the day therefore a pretty note of invitation was sent off to Mrs. Stephen Howard, and by the same post went an urgent letter from Mrs. Trafford begging her if possible, for her sister's sake, to accept it.

"I know it will be most inconvenient for you to come here, dear, just now," she wrote, "but if it *is* possible to do so, I beg you to come. The island is looking lovely, the house is most comfortable and the carriage and horses are always at my disposal. Miss Theodosia is *very* anxious that

you should come, so for dear *Laura's* sake I *trust* you will be able to come."

Thus urged, Julia wrote back that they would come on the day after to-morrow for ten days, that they could not possibly stay longer than that because they had accepted an invitation to dine at the house of a cabinet minister whom they only knew slightly and could not, without probably giving great offence, get out of it.

"There is something for nearly every day between this and then," said Julia in conclusion, "but only four or five formal dinners which I think I can easily get out of by explaining the circumstances."

On the day appointed therefore they went down and reached Boscombe in time for dinner. Everything went well. Miss Theodosia cried a little when she received Julia and embraced her tenderly and repeated her little speech about the house of mourning and her kindness in coming to it.

"Oh! no," cried Julia, "it is no great kindness on our part, dear Miss Theodosia, unless it is kindness to ourselves. We were delighted to come, weren't we Stevie!"

"That we certainly were," said Stephen, thus directly appealed to for an opinion.

"It is most kind of you to say so, my dear—kinder still to feel so towards a lonely old woman who has very few attractions to offer you," said Miss Theodosia in a shaking voice.

But after this, the old lady did not talk much

about her loss and Julia quite gathered that Miss Theodosia had already got the worst of her grief over. The dinner that evening was quite bright and decorously jovial, and the next morning their hostess met them at breakfast time with a really cheerful—"Well, my dears, it is a lovely day and I want to make the best of it and take you for a long drive. What time will you be able to start?"

"Oh! whenever you like," answered Julia readily. "I can be ready in ten minutes if necessary."

"Then shall we say half-past ten?" asked the old lady, to which they all agreed and when half-past ten came the carriage was already standing at the door. They were all ready too and soon took their places, Julia sitting next to her husband with her back to the horses in spite of Miss Theodosia's protestations that she did not mind that place in the least and, in fact, had all her life been used to giving up the best seat to Lavinia who was more delicately organized than herself and never could bear the motion of riding backward.

"Miss Theodosia," said Julia firmly, "I am *not* going to move—and I *want* to sit next to Stephen and then if he does not behave well I can administer a sharp pinch without anybody being the wiser."

So, with a laugh, they settled themselves and started for their drive. And a very lovely drive they had—"worth leaving London for" as Julia said in her delight, to the great satisfaction of the old lady whose conscience had given her many

qualms for some days past. And then just as they were returning home, Miss Theodosia uttered an exclamation of surprise and called out—"James—stop!" Julia turned her head to see the cause of the pleasure on Miss Theodosia's face and saw a tall well-built soldierly man with close-cut white hair and a well-waxed white moustache, just in the act of lifting his hat to her.

"My dear Frank!" exclaimed Miss Theodosia, leaning over the side of the carriage and holding out her hand. "My dear Frank, how very glad I am to see you. When did you come? Where are you staying? And how long are you going to stop?"

The gentleman had by this time put his hat on his head and had reached the side of the carriage. "My dear Miss Staunton," he said, "I had no idea you were in the Isle of Wight. I— I—" and then he broke off short, as if he did not quite know how to go on.

Miss Theodosia however understood apparently. "Ah, Frank!" she said, shaking her head mournfully, "I have had a terrible loss since I saw you last. But you will come and see me, won't you? I am living for a time at a house called 'Boscombe,' just along the road there. You will come and dine won't you?"

"I shall be charmed," he answered, but all the same he spoke in a conventional tone, such as made Mrs. Trafford open her eyes a little.

Miss Theodosia evidently noticed nothing. "To-

night," she said, "will that suit you? Yes, at eight o'clock then," and then she shook hands with him again and made a sign to the servants that they should drive on.

"Such a dear fellow," she said wiping a tear or two away from her cheeks. "I have known him for forty years. Indeed ever since he was quite a boy. Of course, I was always much older for he was two years younger than Lavinia, but I always thought they would have made a match of it, for they were devoted to one another for years."

"What is his name?" asked Mrs. Trafford.

"Adeane—Colonel Adeane. But we," with a sigh, "have always called him 'Frank!'"

At this point an awful thought came into Julia Howard's mind, an awful recollection of what her sister had told her of certain circumstances connected with Miss Lavinia Staunton's death. How Warner had bent down to hear her mistress's murmured words when she had partially recovered from the fainting fit with which she had received the news of the robbery. "Oh! Frank, Frank, to think that you should have come to this. Oh! my God, I think it will break my heart."

During the few minutes which elapsed between parting with Colonel Adeane and their reaching the house, Julia sat buried in thought, turning the new idea over and over in her mind, until she felt as if she could more easily take a leaf out of poor dead and gone Miss Lavinia's book, and relieve her mind by going off into violent hysterics than she could

take off her hat and, in her state of burning curiosity, go through the long and formal luncheon which was then awaiting them in the dining-room.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TRUTH AT LAST.

"Talk not of others' lives, or have a care
Of whom you talk, to whom, and what, and where;
For you don't only wound the man you blame,
But all mankind, who will expect the same."

—HORACE.

As soon as luncheon was over, however, Julia rose and said she was going to her room, that she wanted to write a letter if Miss Theodosia did not happen to want her. The old lady said that she did not, and begged her to do exactly as she liked. "You have not come to Boscombe to be my slave, my dear," she said kindly.

"You are very kind," said Julia—then looked at Stephen. "Stevie," she said, "I wish you would come up for a few minutes. I want to ask you about something."

So together they went upstairs, and as soon as the door was shut Julia seized his hand eagerly. "Oh, Stevie," she exclaimed, "such a thought has come into my mind."

"Yes—and about what, my bird?" he asked, sitting down in the big easy chair by the bow window and looking up at her with interest.

"About the Little Street Hall robbery."

"Really, and what of it?" still in an awaiting tone.

"Stevie," said Julia, impressively, and dropping down on her knees before him. "Stevie, that was the man who did it!"

He gave such a start at her words that he nearly threw her backwards. "Oh, my dear, you made me jump nearly out of my skin," he said, drawing her towards him. "What man do you mean, dear?"

"That Colonel Adeane. Depend upon it he is the man! Miss Theodosia called him 'Frank,' said they had always called him Frank and that he and Miss Lavinia had been in love with each other for years. So you can understand how she would call out to him when she discovered him in her bed-room, 'Oh! Frank, Frank, to think you should have come to this! Oh! my God. I think it will break my heart.' Did you not see how confused he was at the sight of Miss Theodosia, and how coldly and conventionally he received her invitation to dinner. *I* did, and I am sure he was the man who did it, perfectly sure. What do you think about it, Stephen? Tell me."

"Well," he said at last, "if you want to know exactly what I think, Juey—I think you are going out of you mind. You must be mad to suggest such a thing."

She took as a joke what he was meaning in sober earnest. "Yes, I know," she answered rather inconsequently, "but Stevie, did you look at the

man? Why, he had guilt and confusion *stamped* upon him. He was so confused he scarcely knew how to speak to Miss Theodosia. Really, I think she ought to be told about it, because if it is true that Miss Lavinia wished to shield him because of what had gone before, she is not here now to be vexed about it and it does seem a shame that those jewels, those lovely rubies, should be spirited away and any effort spared which might possibly restore them. I really think I *ought* to tell Miss Theodosia what I suspect."

"And I," said Stephen, in an icy voice, "insist upon it that you do nothing of the kind."

"Stephen!" cried Julia, looking at him in amazement.

He answered the look straight into her eyes. "Yes," he said, coldly, "I don't ask you. I simply *insist* that you never breathe this ridiculous idea of yours to a living soul! Do you think that I am going to allow you, my wife, to make such a fool of yourself as to carelessly cast a foul suspicion on a well-known man, a mere suspicion, one that has absolutely no grounds whatever but the coincidence of a name? Why, you must be mad to dream of such a thing!"

Julia rose to her feet. "I am not mad at all, Stephen," she said with dignity, "and it is not right of you to speak to me in that way if I were. I have something more than mere suspicion. Why, if it was all right, was an old friend of forty years' standing so confused when he met Miss Theodosia?

I ask you was his manner all right? Was his way of accepting the invitation for to-night that of an old friend? Was he not confused, strained, uncomfortable looking? Did he not give you the impression of a man who would gladly get out of it if he could?"

"Yes, he did, and so I dare say he would have done," answered Stephen promptly. "Remember this man was spoony on Miss Lavinia years and years ago—probably as far as back as five and thirty years since. And it is very likely that he got over all that nearly as many years ago and that as a matter of fact he would rather walk up to a cannon's mouth than come and talk over the past with an old lady who would be likely to rake up just what he most wanted to forget. And apart from that you have got a great many people to consider besides him. Probably, *if* it was true that he had taken the jewels and you could clearly prove it, Miss Theodosia would rather lose twenty times as much than convict an old friend of his position. Not for a moment that I wish to imply that I have any belief in or sympathy with your absurd fancies. The whole thing is preposterous on the very face of it. Why you might as well accuse me of it—better, for I should do nothing and he would certainly at once enter an action against you, and very properly too."

"I believe he did it," said Julia obstinately.

"Well, whether you believe it or not it is not your place to give an opinion. You have absolutely *nothing* to gain by it," he went on, "and it can

make no real difference to you whether Laura ever wears those rubies or not. Anyway, I must beg that you will be silent on the subject."

"Well, I think I ought to tell Miss Theodosia and then she can do as she likes about following it up," said Julia. The Traffords were all alike in one respect, they possessed a wonderful tenacity of purpose; and Julia in particular when once firmly possessed of an idea did not easily give it up.

Stephen Howard uttered an exclamation of impatience and disgust. "You must do nothing of the sort," he cried. "Can't you see how unwise and impolitic such an idea is. Just think of the consequences if you prove to be wrong—and just think of the consequences if you prove to be right. Julia, my dear child, I beg, I implore of you to give up this foolish scheme."

He was so terribly in earnest that he caught her hands in his and Julia felt that they were trembling with excitement. For a moment or so they stood facing one another, then she drew her hands away and moved a step or two back. "You have put a new idea into my head," she said shortly.

"Thank God," said he, in a tone of relief.

"I don't know about that," she returned in a frozen sort of tone—"but I will not mention this idea of mine to Miss Theodosia or any of the others, not without letting you know it, that is."

Stephen walked to the window and looked out—his wife followed him with her eyes and saw that he was shaking visibly, saw that he drew his hand across

his eyes and then passed his handkerchief across his forehead.

"I wish you would go away a little and leave me alone," she said, after a few minutes had gone by—"I want to think this all out."

He turned round from the window and came close to her. "Juey—my own love," he said, "take my advice—*Don't* think it out. Let sleeping dogs lie! No good can come to you by arousing them."

"I will see," was all she said—"I must think first."

"Kiss me before I go," he said humbly—"and if I used words to you just now which were hard, forgive me, darling—I was so anxious that you should not take a step lightly the consequences of which would be irrevocable."

And so Julia kissed him and uttered the words of forgiveness for which he had pleaded with such eloquent looks and tones. And when he had gone she sat down to think over the new idea which his anxiety that she should not raise any further question about the jewel robbery had suggested to her mind. Ah me! it was the darkest hour of her whole life, that when she sat down face to face with the horrible and loathly idea that this Colonel Adeane was one of a gang of scientific thieves, and that her husband, her lord, her king, was another!

Exactly how the idea was born in her mind she did not know—it might have been a look of *fear* in Stephen's handsome eyes—it might have been the urgency with which he insisted, begged, implored,

her to keep silence—it might have been some swift and sudden piecing together of fragments of evidence and incidents which had puzzled her in the past—it might have been any or all of these things, anyway certain it is that in the flash of a moment, the twinkling of an eye, much that before had puzzled her suddenly became clear, that which she had not been able to understand all at once became as an open book to her, clear as the sun at noontide; and when the realness of it all fairly dawned upon her, Julia Howard crouched down into the big chair and wept, poor girl, as if her heart would break.

She had not moved when, more than an hour afterwards, her husband came up again.

"They want to know if you will go for a little drive this afternoon?" he began, then when she raised her face he cried—"Oh! my darling, what is it?"

She lifted herself up wearily. "No, tell them I've got a headache—I want to rest for the present."

"And I may come back?" he asked.

"Yes, I want you."

So presently he came upstairs again. "Lock the door," she said, "and come and sit here on the sofa beside me. I have a great deal to tell you."

He did her bidding and sat down beside her, putting his arm round her waist as he always did when they had confidential talks together. Then he kissed her and waited for her to go on.

"I told you," she began in a dull voice of pain—

"that a new idea had suggested itself to me. Well, I have been thinking, thinking, thinking about it until I feel as if my brain would burst. I must tell you everything that has presented itself to my mind and I must go back to the first time that you ever came to our house. If you remember Mrs. Lovelace came that afternoon."

"Yes, I remember."

"I had occasion, or to be accurate occasion arose, to mention her diamonds and you asked me carelessly enough if she had fine diamonds? I told you —I remember it perfectly—that she sometimes blazed like a jeweller's shop. Well, not very long after that we went to stay at Matcham and whilst we were there Lady Lucifer's jewels were stolen ——"

"And my sister's," he put in quickly.

"Yes," said Julia significantly, "*and your sister's*. It was not long after that that Mrs. Lovelace's diamonds were obtained by a cleverly thought out plan, so cleverly thought out that if she had not happened to have been at the Mauleverers' during the whole of that afternoon, she would probably always have believed that Alice Mauleverer had stolen them. After that three other large houses in the immediate neighbourhood were robbed, and then this great robbery took place at Little Street Hall."

"Well," said Stephen—"you are telling me a great deal that I already know. What do you make of all this?" With an immense effort Julia braced

herself up to tell the rest. "I think, Stephen," she said sadly, "that if you and the Markhams had remained in Australia, it is very unlikely that these particular robberies would have been committed."

He neither started nor let go his hold of her waist. "My dear," he said with perfect calmness—"if anyone but yourself had said this to me I should have taken it very differently. A woman I should have invited to go to my lawyer, a man——I would have thrashed within an inch of his life. With you it is different—I am sure it must pain you far more to say and what is worse *think* all this, than it does me to hear it. But have you thought out seriously what it is that you accuse me of? Literally of being a thief and in connection with a gang of thieves. Remember, Juey, my dear, it is a dreadful charge—one which it is perhaps lucky for you that you have made against your husband who is not likely to use it against you."

"Yes. I have thought about it seriously enough, Stephen, God knows," she cried with sudden passion —"God knows," she repeated miserably. "Thought about it, why I have been thinking until my head feels ready to burst."

"My dearest child, your poor little bursting head will be raging with delirium if you let these wild ideas take root in it," he said tenderly. "But now look at the other side of the question—neither I nor Bob and his wife have ever been at Little Street Hall in our lives; so how do you imagine we can have carried out this robbery?"

"I have thought of all that," she said wearily. "Last year did not my mother go there? Did not she go to stay with Maimie immediately after she returned home to St. Eve's? Well, she happened to tell me not long after as a proof of Maimie's kindness of heart, that she had been so interested in the old ladies and in her visit, and how she had asked just how they lived and what their house was like, and all the rest of it. Oh! Stevie—Stevie," she ended wretchedly, "I never thought it would come to this."

"My dearest child," he said soothingly—"as yet it has come to nothing at all. I assure you, you are worrying yourself very unnecessarily about a mere fancy. Of course if you like to let your imagination run wild it is the simplest thing in the world to build up a chain of supposititious evidence out of fancy alone—I for instance, might believe you to be a murderess, but that you know, would not make you one."

"Can you deny it?" she burst out at last.

"Certainly I can," he answered.

"*Do* you deny it?"

"Yes—I do deny it. I can and will swear that I have all my life kept my hands from picking and stealing—all my life."

"Then why—" she demanded—"why did you make a plan of Orford Place while we were staying there?"

"Of Orford Place—Juey!" he cried—"What in Heaven's name *are* you talking about?"

She beat her hand impatiently upon her knee once or twice—then turned fully to him. "You remember our staying at Orford Place?"

"Of course I do."

"Then you may remember too that I went to a bazaar with Lady Ceespring and the others—"

"Yes."

"And that you stayed behind—to write letters?"

"Well?"

"Well, when I came home, I sat down on the arm of your chair to talk to you and I noticed that you had been making a plan, as if you had been idly drawing in the blotting-book. I asked you why you had been making a plan and you put me off carelessly — Do you remember all this?"

"No, I don't—but go on."

"Well, I thought no more of it just then, but down stairs during tea, Madge Orford asked me for an address, and when I went up to dress for dinner I went to the writing-table to write it down and then I saw *that the leaf of the blotting-book had been torn out—it was gone!*"

"And yet there has been no robbery at Orford Place," said he half-laughing.

"Shall I tell you why? Because the Ceesprings happened not to have been at Orford Place since; that is why."

"Upon my word, you would make an excellent detective," he exclaimed satirically.

"Oh! Stevie," she cried, the tears rushing into

her eyes, "don't speak like that—it is too serious —too awful. And I—I am *so* unhappy."

He caught her eagerly in his arms. "Julia—my love, my dearest," he cried—"do let me beg and pray of you to put all this nonsense out of your mind—It will ruin our happiness, my dear, we who love one another so."

"Stevie," she said brokenly—"will you tell me everything about that gold-mine that you said you had an interest in?"

"Dear child, if I had been free to tell I should have told you when you asked me about it," he answered.

"I will never breathe a word to a soul—I will take the most solemn oath never to divulge a word to any living being," she said eagerly. "And if you will tell me I will promise faithfully that I will never mention this subject to you again as long as I live."

He still shook his head. "You put a dreadful temptation in my way, dearest," he said wistfully—"but all the same I cannot tell you. I have given my word and I cannot break it even for you."

"You will not?"

"It is not a case of will or will not," he answered, "it is impossible for me to tell you. I have given you my word that I never stole anything in my life, and that must be enough for you. At least if it is not I cannot help it. I am very very sorry but I cannot help it."

She remained silent for a few moments, and then

she suddenly turned and looked at him, "Stevie," she said, "if you will answer me *one* question on your sacred word of honour I will believe that I have wronged you utterly and vilely to-day."

"I will answer you if I can," he replied.

"You say that you never stole anything in your life. Well, on your word of honour will you assure me that you are not mixed up with a gang of men who do steal and who make stealing their profession, and that you have never given these people information? Answer me that question, and on your answer I will stake my belief one way or the other."

She was so desperately in earnest, she looked so true and good, so eager for his denial that for some minutes he sat staring at her like one fascinated. She had taken hold of him by the arm with both hands in her anxiety to get at the truth, and as she sat there she saw what the answer would be in the depths of his handsome eyes.

"No," he said at last, slowly and very unwillingly but as if the truth was being wrung from him in spite of himself. "I cannot tell you that."

For a moment she still looked back into his eyes, then her hands fell nervelessly from his arm—"I knew it," she moaned—"I knew it!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

"WELL?"

"Great sinners and great saints are made of much the same stuff. The man who commits tremendous crimes is the man who, under different conditions, would have been capable of deeds of unparalleled daring, or heroic self-sacrifice."

For a long time neither of them spoke or moved—Julia sat still as a woman does sit when a terrible blow has just fallen upon her, and Stephen Howard had sunk back against the head of the sofa like one utterly exhausted. In the mind of each there raged a wild fury of ideas; on his side of anger that he had not been able to look at her and tell the one lie which would have ensured her future belief in him, of awful dread of a future which he would have to live out without her, of contempt at his unspeakable folly in not having secured safety before his marriage by burning his boats behind him. And on Julia's side there was quite as conflicting a crowd of thoughts! She thought of the blow such knowledge would be to her people; that Miss Theodosia would certainly never leave Anthony Staunton her twelve thousand a year now; she thought of how all her friends would sneer if the truth came out, those

who had flattered and fawned upon her most of all; she thought of how they would sneer and invent wonderful tales "on the best authority" if she and Stephen parted—and the very thought of parting with Stephen brought the hot tears to her eyes and made her realize how utterly and entirely she loved him still in spite of everything. Involuntarily when she reached this point she put out her hand and laid it on his.

He started violently as he felt the soft touch. "Well, what are you going to do?" he asked, almost roughly, yet with a suspicious break in his voice.

"Oh! Stevie—Stevie," she cried piteously. "I do love you so. I do love you so!"

The reply was so different from the torrent of reproaches that he had been expecting, that he, strong man though he was, broke down altogether. He flung himself at her feet and hid his face upon her knee and burst into violent sobbing. And Julia bent down over him and put her arms about him and soothed him tenderly. "Don't cry, Stevie," she kept saying—"don't cry like that, darling."

At last he grew calm and presently was able to speak. "I thought you were never going to have anything more to do with me," he said with a shudder. "I thought you didn't mean to own me again. I thought you were going away from me."

But Julia held him close in her arms against her faithful woman's heart and laid her cheek against

his throbbing head. "No, no, not that, dear," she said. "I won't—indeed I can't pretend that all this is not an awful blow to me. I feel as if I have lived a life-time of misery in the last few hours. But I am not going to leave you—I am no doll, no fair weather wife. I told you so once before."

For a long time he did not say anthing, but at last he spoke.

"I've been such an outcast all my life—I never knew what sunshine was until you came into my life and gladdened every hour I lived. I can never make you understand quite what my past has been —what I was born to, a heritage of what the world calls sin and we called only business. You know, Juey, there is no very hard and fast line between the man who helps himself out of the wealth of rich men who can afford to lose and do not take the trouble to look after the safety of what they set so much value on after they lose them, and the man who deliberately swindles the widow and the orphan by getting them to put their bit of money into bogus companies. I won't excuse myself, Juey— but I tell you this that I should never have gone into this of my own free will. I should never have gone into it at all if I had not been born to it, brought up to it just as I might have been to any other profession."

"You are mixed up with others—can you tell me nothing about it?"

"Absolutely nothing," he answered—"in fact I know very little myself, and what I know I am

bound never to divulge under any circumstances, not even to save my own life."

"Can you free yourself from this society?"

"Yes."

"Under what conditions?"

"By taking additional oaths of secrecy."

"And you will set yourself free at once?" she asked anxiously.

"I will do anything that you like, dear," he said. "You shall do what you will with me. To-morrow if you will let me leave you here I will go to head-quarters and take the oaths which will free me for ever. After that I shall have no will but yours."

"And you will *never never* go into this life again?" she urged.

"Never—I swear it on my honour," he answered solemnly.

Neither he nor she noticed that the phrase came somewhat oddly from him. To Julia's ears it sounded all right, for she had more than once tempted him sorely to break his word and she had not succeeded in doing so. And Stephen himself had always, apart from his *profession*, lived the life strictly of a man of the most rigid honour and would no more have helped himself to a shilling out of his neighbour's purse than he would have struck his wife across the face.

To some people this may read as an impossible character but believe me it is not so, it is no more impossible than it is impossible for thousands of well-born, well-educated men of honour who go into

God's House of their own free will and take the most solemn oaths of fidelity before God and man, and afterwards hold them so lightly that our divorce courts are filled to overflowing and a husband who really loves his wife after a matter of ten years or so is looked upon as a curiosity, as if he were some strange animal with habits which need studying because they are so unusual.

Nor are the men only to blame in this respect—there are plenty of wives in England, especially in London, whose behaviour is a disgrace to their woman-hood and a shame to themselves. For instance I know one little woman who was married a few months ago. She is not in the least degree pretty though she gives herself the airs of an acknowledged beauty. She has a little air of tossing her head and a spontaneous sort of grin which comes into play on all occasions in season and out of season, and otherwise she is a little skinny ungraceful bunch of bones with a nut-cracker nose and chin and a mole on her cheek. She is still young, but not quite so young as she gives out, and she is utterly and entirely and I fear irretrievably silly in every respect.

Well, this young person's husband is a fine good-looking young fellow, a trifle slow perhaps but distinctly honest. He is already so impressed with his little wife's utter foolishness that he spends his time for the most part in an agony of fear that she will one day do something too foolish and childish for words. The result is that she goes freely about

bleating of the trial that dear Jack's jealousy is to her. "I've only been married four months"—she explains—"and it is hard I can't speak to any other man because dear Jack is so jealous," and so on. Well, at last I found out what this nice young person's ambition was! What do you think? To have an attendant man! A man who will go from one dowdy afternoon to another dowdy afternoon and be at her beck and call, to stand by while she flirts with other men and thankfully accept the crumbs that fall from her Beautyship's table! Little idiot! So as she is not attractive enough to secure a really smart man, and as several very smart men, to my knowledge, do not care to see poor "Jack" on the grill, she has to content herself with an ancient beau, who has been the laughing-stock of society for many and many a year. For my own part, I don't think poor "Jack" is brilliant but, hang me, if I wouldn't rather spend an hour talking to him any day than to the pompous old mummy whom Mrs. Jack drags from one place to another with such an air of coquetry and pride.

Yet Mrs. Jack would be mightily offended if anyone ventured to question her right to be called an honest woman, or even hinted that she was not doing her duty by her husband. And the men who are literally living two lives would be vastly offended if one dared to cast a doubt upon the lustre of that which they proudly call their honour! Dear, dear, what a quaint world this is.

"We must go away, Stephen," said Julia sud-

denly after a few minutes. "Oh! yes, indeed we must. I should always live in the direst dread of the whole truth coming to light, and if it ever did I should die of shame. I know that I ought—if I was a Spartan good kind of wife—to urge you to give every farthing you have to a hospital and yourself to the law. But I'm not a Spartan and I think I never was very good, and I can't bring myself to do anything except to beg that you will give it all up and come away with me to a place of safety and let us try to forget that these things, these dreadful things, have ever been, and help one another to live a good and quiet life in the future."

He was almost struck dumb by her words, by the mercifulness of her decision—for he had expected something utterly different. And he laid his head against her shoulder and made a mighty vow within his own heart that by hook or by crook—no, God help him, *not* by crook—he would turn to a different kind of work and make two fortunes, one for his wife to spend as she would, the other that she might endow some charity with at least twice as much as he had ever drawn from the company with which he had been associated almost ever since he could remember.

But I must say that Stephen Howard felt no more *shame* at his "profession" than did ever any highwayman of old. He was grieved that the wife whom he adored should be distressed and he was angry with himself for having placed her in a position of some risk—beyond this, however, he only

thought it a pity that everything had come to light.

"Stevie—my dear," Julia said at last—"there is one question I want to ask you. It is about Bob and Maimie. They belong to this dreadful society too?"

"I can't tell you—don't ask me," he said in great distress.

"But Bob at least does—I am sure of it."

"My darling, I beg of you to let that question rest. And pray"—he cried—"do let me implore of you to say no word which will cast suspicion upon my sister. Promise me you will do this."

"Yes," she said—"I will promise you. I have my own thoughts about it Stevie—I know what I think. And now let me say just one thing more—it is that as long as you keep faith with me—and I know that you will—I will never mention this subject to you again. Let it be as if this discovery of mine had never been made, for if it is constantly being discussed and ragged over between us, we shall only have a miserable and wretched life, and indeed it would be better to part at once."

"Oh! Juey," he cried—"how good, how generous you are."

"Nay," she answered with a touch of her old sarcasm, "you had best say nothing about that. There's a saying you know, which says 'It's easy work burying other folks' bairns,' so we might read it 'It's easy work forgiving other folks' losses,'"—and then, poor girl, the strain became too much for

her and she burst out crying and hid her poor flushed shamed face upon the breast which in strict justice she ought to have scorned but which in reality this dreadful trouble seemed only to have made dearer than it had been before.

CHAPTER XXV.

A BRAVE FRONT TO THE WORLD.

"Two things ought to be the object of our fear,
The envy of friends and the hatred of enemies."
—Bias.

But Julia's weakness soon passed. She was a young woman of marvellous energy, and before she went down to dinner that evening—which she did wearing a charming white gown and such a bright smile that not even her mother guessed at the existence of the aching heart it covered—she had already arranged their plans.

"We must get out of this earlier than we intended, Stevie," she told him. "We must get home as soon as possible—and I think you had better be ill as soon as you possibly can and go up to Town to consult a doctor. You know we must give some reason for our leaving England—we cannot give up our flat and go off just at this time with no more apparent cause then a mere freak. But if you find the English climate tries your lungs, we can quite easily manage it."

"But must we give up our flat?" he exclaimed.

"Oh! Stephen, yes—I should never know another moment's peace—I should never care to live there again," she cried. "Now listen; this is what I should do. You go to Town to-morrow to consult a doctor—write to me to-morrow to say that you are to see him the next day. Write the next day and say that you are most imperatively advised not to stay another winter in England and in fact that the sooner you get out of England the better. Then suggest a steam yacht."

"A steam yacht!" he cried.

"Yes. Why not? We must live somewhere," she answered, mildly. "If we have a yacht of our own we can take everything we most value in Victoria Street with us. Quite half the things could be used for fitting her up."

"But you, Juey—how will you like it?" he cried.

"Oh! I am a very good sailor," she answered.

"But I wanted to turn to work of some kind," he exclaimed. "I mean to make a fortune."

"So you can. We can more easily store a yacht than get a house taken care of," she answered. "Besides you must have some time to find out what you can do, or find to do. Depend upon it the yacht is the best scheme we have hit on yet."

"Then it shall be a yacht," he answered.

So at dinner-time Julia went down saying brightly that her head was better, almost well in fact, although, as Miss Theodosia told her kindly, anyone could see she had not been well by the dark

rings under her eyes. And then she said that she was a little anxious about Stephen's health, she was afraid everything was not well with him here," laying her hand lightly on that part of herself which might be taken to indicate the heart or the lungs as the observer thought proper.

"But don't talk about it to-night," she said, when Miss Theodosia and Mrs. Trafford broke out into simultaneous expressions of regret. "It may be nothing. If you don't mind, Miss Theodosia, Stephen will go up to Town to-morrow and have a good opinion."

Thus prompted the two older ladies cast careful glances at Stephen when he came downstairs, and as traces of the storm through which he and Julia had just passed were still plainly to be seen on his face, Mrs. Trafford and Miss Theodosia were not far wrong in saying that he really was looking very ill, poor fellow, so ill that they wondered how it was possible they had never noticed it before.

On the whole it was a very pleasant evening. Colonel Adeane came in good time, looking handsomer in evening clothes than he had done in the morning, and he took Mrs. Trafford in to dinner and sat between her and Miss Theodosia, who forebore to talk to him very much about poor dead and gone Lavinia, on whom he had been so "spoony" five and thirty years before. He was very pleasant and a particularly intelligent man to talk to, and he and Mrs. Trafford discovered so many mutual friends that they became great

friends before the meal came to an end. And Miss Theodosia suddenly took it into her dear old head that they were flirting desperately, on which her enjoyment of the scene became so exquisite that she nearly smiled herself into tears.

However, before the meal was over, Julia began to look very wan and white. "Do have a glass of port, Juey," said Stephen, coaxingly, when dessert was put on.

And Julia had a glass of port, and then the ladies went off into the drawing-room and left the two men to make friends without them.

"You look so poorly, Julia, dear," said Mrs. Trafford when they reached the drawing-room.

"I don't feel very well to-night, Mother," Julia answered. The strain of keeping up appearances had proved almost too much for her, and now her mother's tone almost broke her down again.

"No, my dear, you cannot possibly feel very well when you are anxious and nervous about your husband," cried Miss Theodosia, tenderly. "Lie down on that sofa till they come in and have a little rest. I am sure, my dear, if nobody knew it, you would much more easily pass for an invalid than Stephen, though certainly he looks anything but well to-night, poor fellow."

I think that I have always described Julia Howard as a very plucky young woman, and truly that night she had need of all her pluck and all her resolution to bear up against the tender interest with which these two talked matters over

—she felt so shamed, so degraded, by the knowledge which had so suddenly and unexpectedly come to her that day; she felt so false to be sitting there as if nothing out of the common had taken place, with the mother who believed everything to be fair and straight with her and the old lady who had been bereft of her beautiful jewels, if not actually by Stephen yet assuredly by the gang with which he had been associated. Oh! I can tell you it was a bitter pill that Julia Howard swallowed when she sat down and deliberately broke the bread of deception and dishonour with those who loved and trusted her.

And yet she could not see her way to doing otherwise. She had married Stephen, she had taken him for better and for worse, and since it had proved to be for worse she could not see that her duty to him was any the less urgent or her promises less binding. Aye, and not only her duty to him—her duty to her own plighted troth!

She was still of the same opinion about Colonel Adeane. She still believed that he was the Frank of whom poor Miss Lavinia had spoken on that eventful night. She had watched him closely during the whole of dinner, and to her mind it was exactly as she had expressed it to Stephen earlier in the day—"he had guilt stamped on his face." Stephen, however, had said positively that he had never set eyes on him or even heard of him in all his life before so that she might be utterly wrong. And in any case she had now no desire to impart

her suspicions to Miss Theodosia, who had it was very evident the most affectionate regard for him.

"He is such a dear fellow," the old lady was saying at that moment to Mrs. Trafford. "I do hope you will see something of him whilst you are here. I have known him for forty years. We were always very fond of him, Lavinia and I."

"Oh! I found him very pleasant," returned Mrs. Trafford, promptly. "I don't wonder you are fond of him. Did you like him, Julia?"

"Oh! pretty well," said Julia, carelessly; "but he did not take much notice of me, you know."

She was quite thankful when the two men came in, and all such conversation was made impossible, and she was more thankful when Colonel Adeane at last went away and she was free to plead weariness and go to bed. And so that black dreadful day came to an end at last.

CHAPTER XXVI.

EXILE!

"Shall we sit idly down and say,
'The night hath come; it is no longer day?'
The night hath not yet come; we are not quite
Cut off from labour by the failing light."

—MORITURI SALUTAMUS.

AFTER that everything fell out very much as Mrs. Stephen had intended. The following morning Stephen went up to Town, and when Julia came down the morning after that for breakfast, she brought with her the news that he had an appointment with Sir Fergus Tiffany for that morning at one o'clock.

And about three o'clock in the afternoon, just as they were going out for a drive, she received a telegram which said—"I saw Fergus Tiffany this morning. Am strongly urged to leave England at once. Come back as soon as you conveniently can."

"I ought to go back at once," she said looking doubtfully at Miss Theodosia.

"My dear," said the old lady. "God forbid that I should wish to keep you a single hour away under such circumstances. Pray go *at once*, my dear, and

your maid shall follow with your things by the six o'clock train if she can get ready to catch it. If not she shall come by the first train in the morning. If you go to the station *now* you will just get across in time to catch the next train up to Town."

Thus hurried, Julia ran up to her room, asked her maid for her jewel and dressing-case, took a travelling cloak and one or two trifles which she was likely to want on the journey and was down stairs again before the carriage was at the door.

"I am so sorry to leave you like this," she said to Miss Theodosia as they bowled along—"but indeed it is necessary that I should go."

"Imperative, my dear," cried Mrs. Trafford who was overflowing with sympathy.

"Oh! my dear," the old lady exclaimed—"you must not say a word, not a word. I understand so well—I so thoroughly sympathize with you, and I do so hope and pray that it will not prove anything serious with Stephen. He is such a dear fellow, so good and kind and chivalrous. Oh! I do so trust it will prove to be but a mere scare."

You may imagine the state of poor Julia's feelings, how she writhed and groaned within herself, how her cheeks burnt and her eyes seemed afraid to look up and encounter the kind orbs of the sweet old lady who had been wronged so fearfully by that dreadful society!

"I expect we shall have to get away at once," she murmured, feeling that she was expected to say something.

"Oh! evidently so. And my dear," said Miss Theodosia—"you will let me know what your plans are? I should like to come up and see the last of you—I could not let you go without saying good bye to you and wishing you God-speed."

The poor girl nearly broke down at this. "Oh! Miss Theodosia, how good and kind you are," she burst out. "You don't know, you will never know, how it comforts me to have you say that; and yet —yet—" and then she broke off short and turned her eyes, burning now with scalding tears, away from the other occupants of the carriage.

Miss Theodosia took her hand and held it in her's for the rest of the way, smoothing it and patting it as if she was a troubled child. Mrs. Trafford with suspiciously bright eyes, said "Julie, dear, would you like me to go with you? Because if you would I can, and Amelia can bring my things at the same time as yours."

"I would much rather go alone," answered Julia in a choking voice.

So they let her go alone, and at Southampton she telegraphed to Stephen that she was coming. And what a journey it was for her, poor girl; for she felt when she had said her last good-bye to those two as if she had said good-bye to a clear conscience and the safety of honesty for ever; she felt as if she was driving out of the clear air of early morning into the lurid blood red light of a thundery sunset. She felt as if the earth would hold no more peace for her, not if she should live to a hundred years old.

My poor girl, it was a bitter bitter day for her when she parted from her mother and Miss Theodosia and went up to make such arrangements as would put the man she loved beyond the reach of the strong arm of the laws which he had broken. And yet she loved him even in that hour of shame and bitterness better than she had ever loved him in all the ~~time~~ she had known him.

Stephen met her at the London terminus and had brought the brougham to take her home.

"You have done everything?" was her first eager question.

"My dearest, everything," he answered. "I am now perfectly free of the past, so let your mind be easy on that point. I had a long consultation with our chief yesterday and, of course, I told him exactly why I wanted to resign."

"You told him about me?"

"Yes."

"That—that I—I had—"

"Found out everything? Yes. I told him all. And he was perfectly reasonable—he said that if you felt like that about it, it would be very much happier for everybody that I cut myself off at once. All the same he was awfully struck with your quickness—in fact he said—but there, I had better not tell you that."

"Yes, tell me," she cried eagerly.

"You won't be vexed?"

"Oh! no."

"Well," half unwillingly—"he said that you

would have been such a credit to the society that it was a thousand pities your sympathies went to the other side."

"Oh! Stephen," she cried.

"Well, dearest, this man—who is too kind-hearted to hurt a fly and would starve before he would defraud a poor widow of one single farthing—looks at this scheme from a different stand-point to yourself. He thinks the acquisition of property is perfectly justifiable and looks upon the law as an old fool's wisdom which ought to be materially improved."

"Yes, you are right, I daresay—but I have not yet got used to thinking even of a new law on the question of property. As to myself," with a faint smile—"my dear Stevie, even if my conscience did not stand in the way, I should make a very poor member of this guild. I haven't got pluck enough to begin with."

"No - no—I don't want you to have pluck enough for that, dearest—otherwise," he said tenderly, "you are the pluckiest little woman I ever knew in my life."

They sat for a few minutes in silence—"Stevie," she said at last—"I would rather not part with the brougham."

"Then you shall not," he answered.

"Could I give it to my mother to keep till I come back?"

"To be sure—but in that case you ought to pay for its keep."

"I could do that. Anyway I would rather not part with it," she said.

Now this to Stephen was very good news. He had no desire to exile himself from England for ever, though he would cheerfully have consented to do so in order to secure his wife's peace of mind. But what he now most wanted to do was to go away until her conscience was more used to the facts which she had just learned and her mind satisfied that it was perfectly safe for him to come back, and then for them to return that he might look about him and go into some sort of business, for Stephen hated a perfectly idle life and meant moreover to lose very little time in making those two fortunes of which I spoke a little while ago.

"By the bye," he said presently when they were sitting comfortably at dinner—and Julia was not a little surprised to find how home-like and peaceful everything looked, the terrible tumult in her heart notwithstanding—"by the bye, dear, I have heard of a capital steam-yacht."

"Yes?" There was a servant in the room so Julia was compelled to take a proper amount of interest in his remarks.

"Yes, the Dauntless. She is nearly four-hundred tons and to be had at what is really a bargain."

"Yes! And how is that?"

"Oh! her owner died suddenly and there is not so much money left as was expected. The executors want to get rid of it at once. I want you to go and look over her to-morrow."

"Very well," said Julia—"and if you buy her how soon shall we start?"

"She could not be ready sooner than a fortnight," he answered——

"Oh! not sooner than that?" cried Julia in dismay.

"My dear, it is quite soon enough," Stephen replied soothingly. "Just consider what an immense amount of business there will be to get through. By the bye, have you decided whether to take Amèlie or not?"

"Amèlie would like to go—she is a good sailor," Julia answered.

Stephen was quite right—there was an immense amount of business to be got through during the next few days, but they managed to get it all done in time to start from London at the end of the fortnight. There was so much more to do than to an outsider might seem absolutely necessary—so many more arrangements to be made than if they had merely been setting off on an ordinary yachting-tour. In Julia's mind at least, there was no idea of ever coming back again; it was for her going into exile for ever as an act of expiation for the sins of one whose sins were dearer to her than the virtues of any other man would have been.

Considering the time of year, they got their flat off their hands in a really marvellous manner, and they arranged to take so many of their belongings on board the Dauntless that it was fairly easy to dispose of the residue that was left. But apart from

this there was a great deal besides to get through. Julia needed an outfit suitable for a prolonged yachting tour and Stephen had to get the same. They had to lay in great stores of everything they were likely to want during the next year, paper and pens and ink and books and music enough as Stephen said with a laugh, to stock a shop.

Then they had to say adieu to their already very large acquaintance, and Julia spent the whole of six afternoons driving about to bid good-bye to her most intimate acquaintances, thankful to find some of them out and drop a quiet P. P. C. at their doors—but to brace herself up to face the fire of questions put to her by those whom she was unlucky enough to find at home; to go through the same catechism, to hand on the polite fiction that Stephen's health was not of the best in England and Sir Fergus Tiffany had advised him, indeed ordered him, to leave England at once. So they had got rid of their flat and had bought a steam-yacht, the Dauntless, and in future if they found he was able to bear a London Season they would only hire for the time they were able to stop. Yes, it was a deprivation to her for she liked England, and much more so for Stephen who liked England better than any other part of the world but, of course, his health was the first consideration and everything else must give way to that.

Was the Dauntless a good size? Oh! yes, nearly four hundred tons! Then were they going to take a large party out with them? On which Julia was

obliged to confess that they were not going to take anybody but themselves; and oh! how her cheeks burnt, poor girl, as she reached that point and how she gasped when she got back into the blazing July sunshine and uttered a fervent thanksgiving that she had one less ordeal to undergo.

But the hardest struggle of all which fell upon her was when the last night in London came, and she and Stephen had to go to a very smart dinner which Mr. and Mrs. Bob Markham gave in their honour and to wish them God-speed.

For Julia was convinced that what Stephen had been Bob Markham and his wife still were. She had been able to get no information out of Stephen on the subject, absolutely none, yet she had formed her own opinions and she kept to them firmly. Mrs. Bob, as soon as she heard the news came round to see Julia and had been all that was kind and tender and womanly, she had sat for a long time holding Julia's little clay-cold hand in hers and she had cried softly when she heard the story of the something that was wrong with Stephen.

"My poor little sister," she said—she had never gone so far as to call Julia by that name before—"I am so grieved and sorry for you, dear. It falls hard upon you, darling," and so she had gone on soothing and petting her until at last Julia had broken down and cried her heart out on little Mrs. Bob's gentle bosom.

And then Bob had come in in his blustering breezy way and had tried to re-assure her by telling

her the doctors were a set of old women and Sir Fergus the biggest old duffer of the whole lot. And then he had clapped Stephen on the back and had told him that he ought to be ashamed of himself, a broad-shouldered stalwart fellow like him to be shamming ill like a schoolboy who hadn't learned his lessons.

And after they had gone Julia had turned round to her husband and asked him a question.

"Stevie," she said, "are they both shamming, or don't they know anything?"

"Know anything!" he cried looking at her in horror. "Why of course not, not a word."

She saw enough of Mrs. Bob afterwards to be quite sure that he had spoken the truth and that she really did believe her brother's health to be bad and, if he remained in England, his life in danger. And believing this, she had of course no choice but to go to the dinner which was given in their honour.

"It is perhaps," said Mrs. Bob, when their guests began to arrive, "rather presumptuous of us to give this dinner, as Mrs. Trafford might have wished to entertain them the last night. But we talked it over, Bob and I, and we found that Mrs. Trafford did not mind and that, in fact, having let her flat it would be most inconvenient for her to have a dinner however small, so we determined to do it."

Having come to this determination, Mrs. Bob had done her work thoroughly. Mrs. Trafford was there with Miss Theodosia; Marcus Orford and Madge

were the next to arrive—and as Julia turned from them to see her sister and Anthony Staunton announced and to see them followed by Lord and Lady Lucifer, she felt that the cup of her individual suffering was indeed full and that if any more of the people whose names had become marked in her own mind as being connected with the cause of her exile appeared, she should lose control over herself and commit some foolishness such as shrieking aloud. The others however who came afterwards were happily one and all harmless people who had neither robbed others of their wealth nor yet been robbed themselves. Nevertheless that evening proved a terrible ordeal! Everybody felt that the occasion was a somewhat sad one and that it behoved them to be as gay and festive as possible by way of keeping up two hearts which they suspected were sad, little thinking that one of them had gone nigh almost to breaking.

But at last it came to an end—their healths had been drunk and Stephen had got up in his chair and bowed saying—"Thank you, very much," and nothing more, so that part of the ceremony was got through far more easily than poor Julia had expected, and very soon after that they began to say good night, good night, and good-bye.

The first to leave were the Lucifers who were going on somewhere. "Well good-bye, my dear Mrs. Stephen," said Lady Lucifer taking Julia kindly in her arms. "We are all very very sorry to part with you, and dear old Stephen is a dear old

friend of mine as you know. We shall often be thinking about you and wondering how you are getting on and how the poor chest is. Mind *I* don't believe there is *any*thing the matter with him. *I* think Stephen is a complete fraud and that you look far more ill than he does. However, I hope you will both be back next season as if nothing had happened and whenever you do come back we will make Maimie give another dinner to wish you welcome."

But Julia had nothing to say. She clung to Lady Lucifer for a minute or two and kissed her with white trembling lips, for a good many of the gay rattling words had gone deep down into the heart that was bursting with the weight of shame which knowledge had laid upon it. And then when the Lucifers had gone Miss Theodosia thought she too would be going.

"Good-bye, my dear," she said—"I dare say I shall never see you again, for my time is getting short and my poor dead and gone Lavinia was ten years younger than I. But always remember that the old woman's good wishes went with you and her prayers will follow you. God bless you, my dear, and lessen your anxiety for your husband," and then Miss Theodosia kissed her and set her free hurrying out of the room with the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I should like to go," said Julia to Stephen—"I don't see why you need all say good-bye to me to-night. I shall see you all in the morning. Do

let us go," and then she hurriedly said good-night to them all and went off followed by her husband, who being perfectly well and having every intention of coming back to London before a year had gone by, was naturally only distressed at the effect all this would have on his wife, and so far as he was concerned, was rather amused than otherwise by the fuss which they one and all thought fit to make about their departure on a long pleasure trip, ostensibly in search of health.

"I am sure," said Mrs. Bob to Mrs. Trafford when they had gone, "of one of two things. Either Stephen is much more seriously ill than he chooses to admit and that Julia knows it, or that Julia's own state of health is such as may give us the gravest anxiety."

"What do you mean?" cried Mrs. Trafford in alarm.

"Well, to be candid I don't think that Julia is fit to go off on an indefinite yachting tour."

"But why not?"

"Because they are taking no doctor with them."

"Well?"

"Well, I think they will want one, and a nurse too before long."

"You don't surely mean—" cried Mrs. Trafford.

"Well, I'm afraid I do," returned Mrs. Bob drily.

Thus prompted Mrs. Trafford drew Julia aside when they were all assembled on the platform at Waterloo from which she and Stephen were to start

for Southampton, where they would join the yacht. "Julia, my darling," she said anxiously, "tell me one thing before we part. You are looking very ill—is it your anxiety for Stephen which is making you look so, or is there any cause for your pale face and hollow eyes?"

"No, Mother dear," she answered. "I am perfectly well—very anxious about Stephen, of course—but—but that is all."

"You are quite sure?"

"Oh! yes, perfectly sure. And Mother," she said in a troubled voice—"there is one thing I want to say to you alone—I am going away and it is possible that I may never come back again——"

"Oh! my dear," Mrs. Trafford cried.

"It is more than possible," said Julia solemnly, "that I may never come back, and besides that we never know what will happen. What I want to tell you is this—that *whatever* happens, whatever you hear, whatever people say, will you always remember that, although it almost broke my heart to leave you all, I yet went happily and of my own free will, that I was quite happy to go. You will remember?"

"You are keeping something back," cried Mrs. Trafford.

"No, don't think that. Only you will do what I wish—you will remember the very last thing that I asked of you, won't you?" Julia cried imploringly.

"Oh! my dear——"

"No, don't ask me to tell you anything—only if a certain contingency should arise, you will remember that I am perfectly happy with Stephen and that I love him more dearly to-day than I ever loved him before," and then she flung her arms around her mother's neck and burst into a passion of hard dry sobs.

But only for a moment! The indomitable will which she had inherited from her mother stood her in good stead. She wrenched herself free from the tender clasp of the loving arms and went back with a smile on her face to where the others were standing together in a group.

It was a supreme moment but she triumphed! A word for each—a kiss—a last request to one, some trifling commission for another to execute, and then she got into the train and stood smiling at the window throwing a gay last word to each and all. And then the signal was given and the train began to move slowly out of the station carrying her, brave and smiling to the last, into her indefinite and undeserved exile, leaving her mother and Mrs. Bob standing hand in hand together!

THE END.

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